The New Criterion

September 1993

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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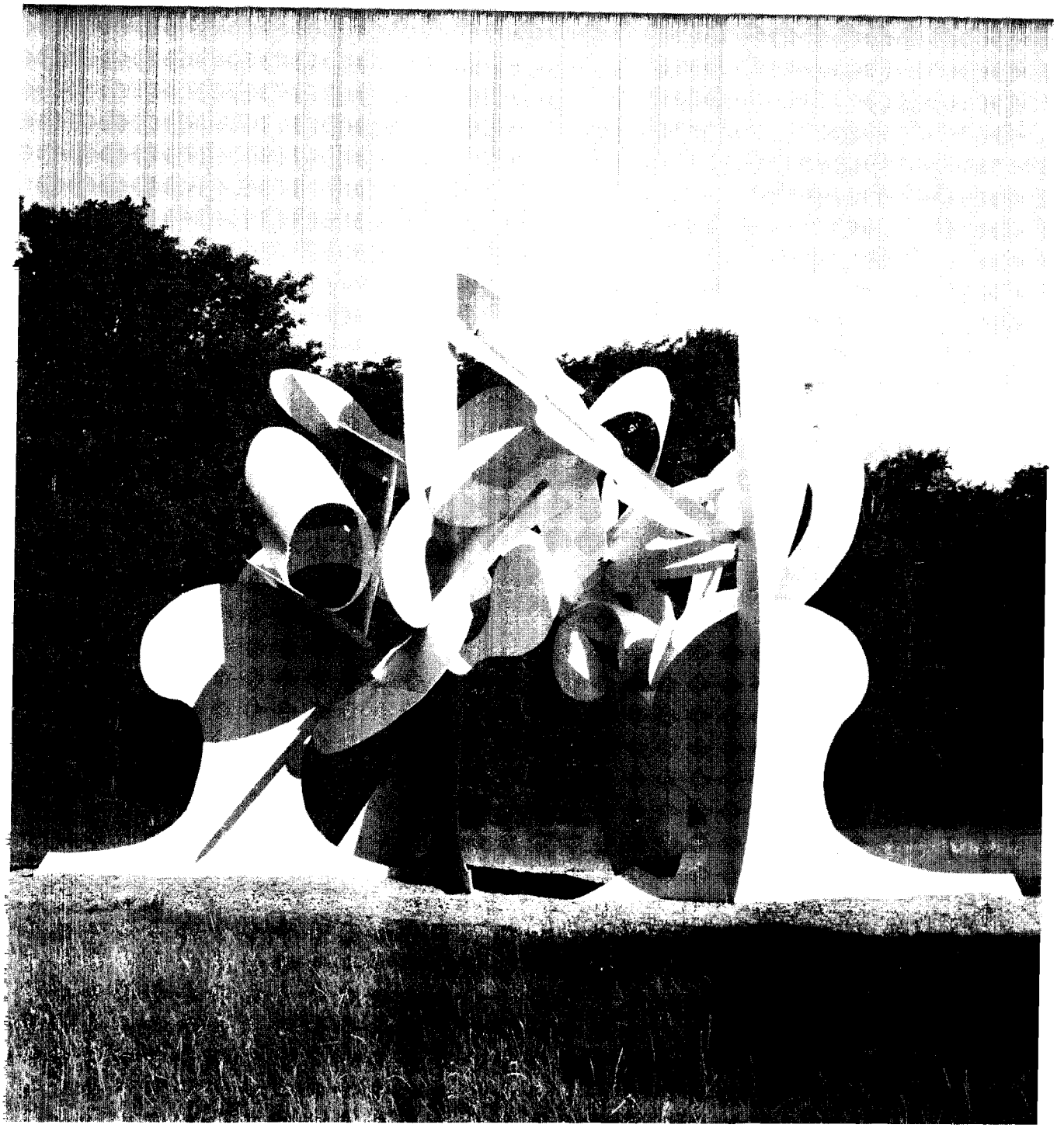

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The New Criterion *September 1993*

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Roger Kimball's book, *Tenured Radicals*, is now available in paperback from Harper-Perennial.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1896-1957) is the author of *The Leopard*. **Stephen Sartarelli**'s translation of *The Devil in Love* by Jacques Cazotte will be published this fall by Marsilio.

Samuel Lipman's latest book, *Music & More: Essays 1975-1991*, was published last year by Northwestern University Press.

Donald Lyons is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion*.

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Frederick Morgan's *Poems: New & Selected* is published by the University of Illinois Press.

Jed Perl is the author, most recently, of *Gallery Going: Four Seasons in the Art World* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

Harvey Shapiro's latest book is *National Cold Storage Company: New & Selected Poems* (Wesleyan/University Press of New England).

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Notes & Comments: September 1993

Why waste time on kooks?

For most of us, the idea of denying the Holocaust—the systematic extermination of some six million European Jews by the Nazis in World War II—is about as plausible as denying the sphericity of the earth. Of course we have all heard of Holocaust deniers. The image we are likely to conjure up is of a right-wing kook who visits the barber too often and distributes books like *The Hitler We Loved and Why*. Why should we take them seriously? After all, there are also people who deny that the earth is round. But as Deborah Lipstadt shows in her disturbing new book, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (Free Press), the phenomenon of Holocaust denial must be taken seriously, partly because it is sharply on the rise, partly because it undermines the idea of historical truth.

What is particularly troubling is the *way* in which such trifling with the historical record is proliferating. It is not simply that there are more and more crackpots declaring that the Holocaust was (in David Duke's phrase) a "historical hoax." That, to be sure, is troubling enough. Yet even more worrisome is the legitimacy conferred upon such declarations by the actions of the media and the academy. This is not to say that the media or the academy grant the idea credence; denying the Holocaust has not—not yet—won respectability. But it has managed to win an audience. That itself is extraordinary. Instead of being instantly dismissed as pernicious nonsense, denying the Holocaust is increasingly accorded the status of a "different perspective," a "dissenting point of view," "another opinion."

Thus it is that Professor Lipstadt, who teaches at Emory University, has repeatedly been asked by various television shows to debate individuals who deny that the Holocaust occurred. The usual plea made by television personnel eager to book her on a program is: "I certainly don't agree with them, but don't you think our viewers should hear the *other* side?" It sounds like good liberal doctrine: free speech, everyone entitled to his own opinion, and so on. But Professor Lipstadt consistently refuses these offers—rightly in our judgment—because she understands that to participate in such debates would be to grant her opponents a measure of credibility they do not deserve. She refuses because she knows that to deny the Holocaust is not simply to offer "another perspective" or express a "different opinion." It is to engage in the kind of ideological warfare that corrupts the very nature of opinion in order to promulgate historical falsehood.

It is a telling fact that this point meets widespread resistance today. Invoking the principle of free speech, many people of

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good will see nothing wrong—everything right—with providing a platform for those who deny the Holocaust. But this liberal sentiment plays directly into the hands of the Holocaust deniers. As Professor Lipstadt observes, "Unable to make the distinction between genuine historiography and the deniers' purely ideological exercise, those who see the issue in this light are important assets in the deniers' attempt to confuse the matter." As has so often been the case, the well-intentioned efforts of liberal apologists help create an atmosphere of legitimacy and tolerance for movements whose goal is to destroy those institutions and attitudes that guarantee liberal tolerance in the first place.

In this context, it is important to understand that denying the Holocaust is only one of many efforts to undermine the authority of historical truth. The phenomenon of Afrocentricism (which, incidentally, often indulges in a bit of Holocaust denial as a sideline) belongs here, as do many varieties of academic literary "theory" that now reign in the academy: deconstruction, extreme examples of "reader-response" theory, new historicism, etc. For all of them, facts are fluid and historical truth is a species of fiction: what actually happened in the past, or what a given text actually means, are for them ridiculous questions. Nor are these attitudes confined to the cloistered purlieus of the academy: in watered-down versions they have become standard-issue liberal sentiment: Rather than risk having to make an unpleasant judgment about the facts, deny that there are any such things as facts.

When we ask how this state of affairs came about, the first answer is the widespread acceptance of cultural relativism. As Professor Lipstadt points out, part of the success of the Holocaust deniers "can be traced to an intellectual climate that has made its mark in the scholarly world during the past two decades. The deniers are plying their trade at a time when much of history seems up for grabs and attacks on the Western rationalist tradition have become commonplace." This tendency, she notes, can in turn be traced to intellectual currents that have their origin in the emancipationist ideology of the late Sixties.

Professor Lipstadt tells the story of a teacher at a large Midwestern university who, in a class on the Napoleonic Wars, informed his students that the Holocaust was a myth propagated to vilify the Germans and that "the worst thing about Hitler is that without him there would not be an Israel." The teacher was eventually dismissed. But many students defended him, arguing that he had a right to present his "alternative" views. Professor Lipstadt comments: "These students seemed not to grasp that a teacher has a responsibility to maintain some fidelity to the notion of truth." This gets to the nub of the problem. Without an allegiance to the ideal of truth, teaching degenerates into a form of ideological indoctrination.

And this brings us to one of the gravest legacies of relativism. What we are witnessing is the *transformation of facts into opinion.* This process is not only destructive of facts—when facts are downgraded to opinions they no longer have the authority of facts—but, curiously, it is also destructive of opinion. As Hannah Arendt observed in an essay called "Truth and Politics," opinion remains opinion only so long as it is grounded in, and can be corrected by, fact. "Facts," she wrote, "inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth. Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute." What is at stake, Arendt concluded, is nothing less than the common world of factual reality and historical truth.

It will be pointed out that truth is very often difficult to achieve, that facts are often hard

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to establish, that the historical record is incomplete, contradictory, inaccessible. Yes. Precisely. But the recalcitrance of truth is all the more reason we need to remain faithful to the procedures for achieving it: without them we are blind. Behind the activity of the Holocaust deniers is an unhappy efflorescence of anti-Semitism. But the problem goes even deeper. As Professor Lipstadt warns, "at its core" such a denial of history "poses a threat to all who believe knowledge and memory are among the keystones of our civilization." This is one reason that we must pay attention to kooks.

Perfect justice

In an art world that is besieged these days by vexing problems ranging from excessive politicization to the ongoing recession in the contemporary art market, developments that really cheer the spirit are such a rarity that news of them must be applauded when they occur. One such development came earlier this year when it was announced that Tom Armstrong, the deposed former director of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, had been appointed to the directorship of the new Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. Talk about perfect justice! This appointment struck us as an amazingly appropriate reward for the years of service that Mr. Armstrong devoted to the task of muddling all distinctions between art and kitsch. Having succeeded so well in lowering the standards of professional judgment at the Whitney, thus preparing the museum for a successor who is proving to be even more adept at the same game, Mr. Armstrong was obviously the ideal candidate to run a new museum devoted to the figure who was the single most destructive force in American art in the last half of the twentieth century. The trustees of the Warhol Museum are to be congratulated on this appointment of the right man for the right job at the right time.

Now comes an even more thrilling and revelatory appointment of a museum professional who, only three years ago, had won his Warholian fifteen-minutes-of-fame as a hero of the contemporary art scene and was then —well, sort of allowed to settle into obscurity while the art world that had acclaimed him as a warrior and a martyr turned its collective attention to more pressing business. We refer to the appointment of Dennis Barrie, the former director of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, to be the director of the new and yet to be built Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland. This, too, strikes us as a rare example of perfect justice.

Mr. Barrie, it will be recalled, was the man who achieved media renown for his acquittal on charges of obscenity stemming from the famous Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition when it came to the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. He was praised in the highest terms for defending the right of the museum to exhibit pictures that a great many people in Cincinnati and elsewhere regarded—and still regard—as pornographic. Yet this victory, which in the end only proved that our courts of law have now lost the power to define obscenity and pornography in the public interest, effectively destroyed Mr. Barrie's career as an art museum director. The whole story was a wonderful example of art-world hypocrisy at work.

On the occasion of his new appointment, Mr. Barrie gave us yet another glimpse of the high ideals that had guided his decisions as an art museum director. "Not everyone," he told *The New York Times*, "embraces symphonic music or paintings by Rembrandt. This is more accessible, and therefore more fundable." Spoken like a true museum man of the 1990s! The only remaining mystery is how the Whitney Museum missed out on such an obvious candidate to direct its current course.

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Art & its institutions: notes on the culture war

by Hilton Kramer

But the new barbarian is no uncouth
Desert-dweller; he does not emerge
From fir forests; factories bred him;
Corporate companies, college towns
Mothered his mind, and many journals
Backed his beliefs.
—W. H. Auden, in *The Age of Anxiety*

The life of art in this country has clearly entered upon an entirely new phase of its history in this last decade of the twentieth century. For a large part of this terrible century, the gravest assaults on art and its institutions have been mounted by totalitarian regimes in the course of their efforts to impose an absolute and remorseless control over every aspect of life and thought. Now, for the first time in the history of modern democracy, we are witnessing a similar assault on the art and culture of a free society from within the ranks of its own intelligentsia and its official cultural bureaucracy. The effects of this incipiently totalitarian incursion into the life of art are proving to be all the more insidious, moreover, for being made in the name of democracy itself.

It is not only that the politicization of art and its institutions is rapidly accelerating. As a direct consequence of this politicization, every aspect of the life of art has also been increasingly bureaucratized. In more and more of the art world's activities, the center of intellectual gravity has already shifted from decisions made by artists in their studios to decisions made by committees of non-artists that take a purely instrumentalist view of art. An immense superstructure of art advisers, art consultants, art lobbyists, art activists, and other non-artist art professionals, working in close conjunction with a vast network of arts councils, offices of cultural affairs, public art projects, minority and "community" arts groups, and other special-interest cultural organizations, both in and out of government, now exerts an enormous influence in determining public policy as well as private patronage in the art world.

The most significant thing about this bureaucratic leviathan is that it is completely captive to the political Left. Its principal purpose today is to advance the radical Left's agenda for the cultural revolution that has already completed its "long march" through the universities and is currently in the process of annexing many other institutions of cultural life—the art museums, for example, where the revolution has made enormous inroads in programs and acquisitions, and in the policies of the foundations, corporations, and agencies of government that support museums. The effects of this cultural revolution, which are not always separable from the most cynical commercial motives, have already made themselves felt in the media, too—see, for instance, the lamentable condition of the cultural pages of *The New York Times* and the way the arts are covered on National Public Radio and PBS.

The art museums are thus going the way of the American theater, which is largely

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dominated by this cultural revolution, and in this respect, at least, are coming to resemble the productions of the Hollywood studios. The same political imperatives now threaten the future of classical music in this country[1] and cast an increasingly malevolent shadow over the life of serious literature. Political tests are now applied and enforced in virtually every field of artistic and intellectual endeavor, and they are always the same tests. The individual artists who wish to remain independent of these tests—and there are still many artists who do—face an ideological monolith of such formidable power and influence that it makes the old philistine resistance to advanced art seem positively benign by comparison.

Nowhere is the influence of this monster arts bureaucracy more vividly evident than in the kind of Orwellian "discourse" it uniformly employs in its public discussions of art and culture. In this politically denatured discourse, aesthetic considerations are consigned to oblivion while standards more appropriate to the social sciences are given priority. Artistic criteria of value and achievement are supplanted by claims to preferment made in the name of group rights, racial justice, sexual equality, minority empowerment, and other politically correct petitions for advancement on the basis of extra-artistic interests. Art that is not explicitly enlisted in the service of some approved social, sexual, racial, or similar political mission is now an interest that dare not speak its name in the councils of the new arts bureaucracy. Nor are distinctions between high art and popular culture permitted in the kind of bureaucratic discourse that is specifically formulated to eradicate such distinctions lest the dreaded demons of "elitism," "excellence," "quality," and other challenges to a radical and leveling egalitarianism persist in reminding us that in art, as in life, some things are by their nature discernibly superior to others.

In both the rhetoric and the actions of the arts bureaucracy, the current practice of imposing strict political criteria on art and culture has already acquired some characteristic features that are recognizably totalitarian in spirit. Thus, while claiming to speak in the interest of a wide-ranging and beneficent "diversity," the leaders of this cultural revolution adamantly refuse to tolerate any dissent from their own orthodoxy. While advocating greater public access to the arts so that more and more people may enjoy their pleasures and benefits, the new cultural commissars carry on an unremitting campaign to strip high art of everything but its name in order to render it more appealing to larger numbers of people. As a result, any sort of "community" art activity—meaning, in effect, any sort of properly defined politically driven cultural program—is given parity with, if not indeed priority over, the traditional fine arts. Meanwhile, in the classroom the great art of the past is systematically deconstructed and "demystified" as a racist and sexist conspiracy devised by white European heterosexual males to preserve their own power.

This downgrading process takes many forms, some more destructive than others. The old musical comedies, for example, are elevated to the status of grand opera in order to avoid invidious distinctions between high art and popular entertainment—and also, not incidentally, to expand the opera audience to include people who do not like opera. Even that pestiferous form of urban blight called graffiti must be legitimized and aggrandized as serious art—art of the "people"—to make it qualify for the new politically correct support system. In the 1980s, there were actually two graffiti programs funded by the federal bureaucracy at the same time—one to pay for the eradication of graffiti from the urban environment, and another to pay for encouraging its practice as a form of creative expression. Maybe this is what the radicals mean when they talk about the contradictions of capitalism. In this new dystopian realm of arts policy and its rhetoric, "access," too, has become an in-

1 See Samuel Lipman's essay "Who's Killing Our Symphony Orchestras?," which begins on page 13 of this issue.

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strument for imposing political tests, for it is now instantly recognized as a signal to "dumb down" the arts in order to make some approved substitute qualify as the real thing. In the Orwellian discourse of the cultural revolution, "access" often means nothing but censorship in the service of "diversity." In other words, enforced conformity to a low cultural standard.

It was to be expected that the change of administration in Washington would encourage this already powerful aspect of the cultural revolution to become even more aggressive in the pursuit of its radical demands, and so it has. Make no mistake about that. But in attempting to assess the likely consequences of this new aggressiveness in politically correct arts policy, it needs to be remembered that the essential character of the regnant arts bureaucracy and its ideological outlook was set during the immediately preceding administrations in Washington. What began, in the Carter administration, as an amateurish and essentially "pork barrel" attempt to implement a more populist arts policy quickly developed, during the Reagan and Bush administrations, into a tougher-minded and more openly radical program for the arts.

Some spirited attempts were made at both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities to allay the worst effects of this headlong drive to politicize arts policy and to slow the pace of the programs that were already trashing the teaching of the arts and the humanities in the universities. But we can see now that nothing of lasting consequence was accomplished during the Reagan and Bush administrations to change the goals or alter the momentum of the Left's cultural revolution, which continued to prosper even as the American electorate was sending conservatives to the White House with large majorities. On the contrary, the election of presidents Reagan and Bush served as a powerful stimulus to the radical Left, which knew how to exploit liberal sentiment for its own illiberal causes. The Left was far more expert than anyone in the White House about the many ways in which the resources of both the government and the private sector could be made useful to the cultural revolution. This was a battle that conservative politicians never really understood, and therefore proved powerless to affect. To understand the nature of the cultural revolution of our time, you have to take the arts and the life of the mind far more seriously —you have to comprehend more profoundly the magnitude of the loss that follows when the arts have been effectively strangled in the interest of a radical political agenda —than most conservative politicians have shown themselves able or willing to do. Their response to this crisis has been, for the most part, simplistic and unproductive where it has not actually played into the hands of their radical opponents—which, alas, it often has. The only notable exception was Vice President Quayle, but even his campaign to expose the true character of what he rightly dubbed the "cultural elite" in this country, welcome though it was, came too late to make a significant difference. Still, it is worth pointing out that *after* President Bush had been safely defeated in the election, the staunchly liberal *Atlantic* published a lengthy, well-documented, and much-discussed article proclaiming to its readers—as the magazine said on its cover —that "Dan Quayle Was Right!" It was a bittersweet moment for those of us who had for years looked to Washington—and mostly looked in vain—for some sign of leadership or even understanding in what came to be called the culture war. But the conservatives sadly proved to be inadequate to the challenge. Which is how it happened that while winning the Cold War with the Soviet Union abroad, the conservatives in Washington lost the culture war to our own commissars at home.

The cultural revolution, which had its origins in the antiwar movement and counterculture of the 1960s, now presents this country with the gravest domestic crisis it has faced since the end of the Vietnam War. It has already gone a long way toward de-

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stroying our institutions of high culture and our institutions of higher learning. It has made every serious artistic pursuit more problematical than it has been in this country within living memory. And because the cultural revolution has turned every aspect of family and sexual life into an arena of political combat and made every problem deriving from race and ethnicity a battle zone, the culture war is also a moral and social crisis of vast dimensions.

The ambitions animating this cultural revolution grow more unbounded and more uncontainable with every passing day. At a conference that was convened in June at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, under the title "The Public Patron: Drafting a Mandate for a Federal Arts Agency," we were given a very graphic glimpse of where this cultural revolution is going and of the kind of assistance it is receiving in high places. Thus, the conference was told by no less an eminence than Robert Adams, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, which is now the most aggressively P.C. cultural agency of the federal government, that "no overarching standard remains" to be applied in the arts, and that the whole discussion of taste, standards, and values in the arts is in complete "disarray." What Mr. Adams proposed as a replacement for that lost "overarching standard" were "political agreements" in the name of "pluralism," which is now merely a euphemism for multiculturalism and enforced "diversity." This was the voice of the Washington cultural establishment, and its message was unambiguous. It was now accepted policy that the arts were to be treated as a political entitlement, and there was to be no more talk about standards or values. Henceforth "political agreements" would determine the allocation of resources. The elimination of artistic considerations was accepted as a *fait accompli*.

Then the conference was given a preview of what these "political agreements" would entail in a rousing speech by Adolfo Nodal, the general manager of the Department of Cultural Affairs for the City of Los Angeles. Mr. Nodal represented what I suppose can be called the "grass roots" sentiment of the cultural bureaucracy, and he was even more candid than Mr. Adams in dismissing as irrelevant what he dubbed "cosmic arguments" about the arts. "We must move the debate beyond 'excellence,' beyond 'freedom of expression,'" he insisted, and then disclosed to the assembled cultural commissars his own view of what the mission of the arts was now to encompass. The National Endowment for the Arts, he said, needs to be radically expanded, for in the future the arts could and should be used to "reform our schools," "remake our cities," "assist international trade," and foster "holistic health care." Clearly, for Mr. Nodal the sky—or perhaps we should say, outer space—was the only imaginable limit to what the arts would accomplish in transforming every aspect of our society if his proposals were heeded. This speech made Mr. Nodal the real hero of the "Public Patron" conference.

It was left for Ellen Stewart, the founder and director of La MaMa, to sound the strongest note of political paranoia at the conference. She declared without qualification that the condition of the American artist today is exactly comparable to the situation of the Jews in Hitler's Germany. There was throughout the conference, of course, a good deal of talk about the terrible treatment and neglect of artists in America, but it was Ellen Stewart who took the most extreme position by suggesting that the country was actually attempting to exterminate its artists. What was even more remarkable than what she said was the fact that none of the other speakers on the program—not even the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution—bothered to contradict her. It was my impression that no one on the program thought her comments especially extreme. We were thus reminded that this facile political paranoia is also a constituent feature of the cultural revolution, which defines all opponents of its progress as agents of the devil. This is another of the tactics that identify this cultural revolution as essentially totalitarian in spirit.

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James Q. Wilson on the moral sense

by Roger Kimball

We must be careful of what we think we are, because we may become that.
—James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense*

For well over a century, Western intellectuals have rather specialized in bad news. There have been important exceptions, of course. But for the most part, recent reports from the fancier intellectual and cultural fronts have been contributing little to human self-esteem. Sophocles, in a famous chorus from *Antigone*, proclaimed that of "all wondrous things man was the most wondrous"; the Judeo-Christian tradition affirmed that man was created *imago dei*, in the image of God; the Enlightenment, though skeptical about God, nonetheless touted man's autonomy and the universality of human reason; and even Immanuel Kant waxed enthusiastic about "the starry sky above and the moral law within."

What remains? In the middle of the nineteenth century, Darwin came along to tell us that man, far from being *imago dei*, was in fact descended from the higher primates. Marx dismissed the entire realm of morality, religion, and culture as so many examples of ideology: "phantoms formed in the human brain," he sneered. Freud claimed that what used to be called "conscience" was really a repressed distillate of lust and murderous aggression. And in *Beyond Good and Evil*—a title that epitomizes an entire worldview—Nietzsche assured readers that the ambition to provide a rational foundation for morality was "insipidly false and sentimental" in "a world whose essence is will to power."

Today, these revolutionary ideas have lost the thrill of novelty but not their sting. They live on: as routine background assumptions (not to say as tokens of *bona fides*) for most academic intellectuals, and as a horizon of doubt and anxiety for many others. In the intellectual establishment, it is simply taken for granted that—as the philosopher A. J. Ayer put it—moral concepts have "no objective validity whatsoever."

The omnibus term for this situation is relativism. In part, it is a correlate of what we might call the anthropological axiom: the conviction that morality, like human nature itself, is completely plastic, malleable: a function of culture not nature. If a tribe somewhere practices infanticide or cannibalism—well, *chacun à son goût*. One well-known guru of cultural relativism, Clifford Geertz, summed it up neatly when he insisted in the early 1970s that "there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture."

This is the absolute that the deniers of absolutes champion. Their *Index Prohibitorum* is capacious: terms such as "universal," "truth," and "essence" feature prominently, as of course do "good" and "evil." Anything suggesting that something in human nature transcends the leveling contingencies of culture is verboten. The proscriptions come in sweet and sour varieties. Sour is generally

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preferred among academics, as the popularity of gloom-spreaders from Sartre to Derrida and Foucault attests: man "is only a recent invention," Foucault famously sighed in *Les Mots et les choses*, destined to "disappear soon."

But sweet relativism, too, has its appeal, as the attention granted to the chummy nihilism of Richard Rorty reminds us. Rorty, one of the most influential philosophers in American academia today, won his wide following by tarting up relativism with various aw-shucks blandishments. Insisting (like just about every other academic today) on "the ubiquity of language," Rorty's relativism takes the form of a radical pragmatism. He tells us that the statements "It is true because it works" and "It works because it is true" are indistinguishable. He waves a cheerful goodbye to "ideas like 'essence,' 'nature,' and 'foundation,'" denies that human beings possess anything like a "core self," and dispenses with "any truths independent of language." Hence philosophy must emancipate itself from the idea of truth, morality must jettison the distinction between good and evil. There are no such things, Rorty continues, as "plain moral facts," "nor any neutral ground on which to stand and argue that either torture or kindness is preferable to the other." Then comes the sugar: If we would only stop thinking about such anachronisms, we could usher in a "liberal utopia" in which irony triumphs and "the charge of relativism has lost its force."

Although widespread among intellectuals, relativism à la Geertz or Rorty does not proceed entirely unchallenged. The latest challenge comes from the perhaps unlikely quarter of the social sciences. In *The Moral Sense*,[1] James Q. Wilson, Professor of Management and Public Policy at the University of California at Los Angeles, mounts a spirited and articulate defense of the idea that the disposition to make moral judgments is innate in human beings. His frankness is a breath of fresh air: "We do have a core self, not wholly the product of culture, that includes both a desire to advance our own interests and a capacity to judge disinterestedly how those interests ought to be advanced." When was the last time you heard a prominent academic invoke the idea of disinterested judgment (to say nothing of the notion that we possess a "core self") without derision?

Mr. Wilson, whose previous books include *Thinking about Crime*, *Bureaucracy*, and other works concerned with public policy, writes about morality as a public fact. The language of virtue and morality has had a tough time lately. "Our reluctance to speak of morality," he notes, "and our suspicion, nurtured by our best minds, that we cannot 'prove' our moral principles has amputated our public discourse at the knees." Consequently, part of his purpose in this book is "to help people recover the confidence with which they once spoke about virtue and morality." It is not, he writes,

> an effort to state or justify moral rules; that is, it is not a book of philosophy. Rather, it is an effort to clarify what ordinary people mean when they speak of their moral feelings and to explain, in so far as one can, the origins of those feelings.

Because the practice of morality is partly a social act, recovering the language of morality is at the same time an acknowledgment of social responsibility. "Rebuilding the basis of moral judgments," Mr. Wilson points out, "requires us to take the perspective of the citizen, but the citizen has gone to great lengths to deny that he has a perspective to take." While few ordinary people consciously espouse the extreme relativism that makes the academy such a cheerful place today, many have been infected by the habits of mind that such relativism encourages. "We are," Mr. Wilson writes, "engaged in a culture war, a war about values." It says a lot, for example, that it is now easier to renounce a marriage than a mortgage. If so many highly educated people—men and women,

1 *The Moral Sense*, by James Q. Wilson; The Free Press, 313 pages, $22.95.

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moreover, who educate and help to form the tastes of the young—proclaim themselves "liberal ironists," liberal irony will naturally be a powerful ingredient in the cultural climate.

Mr. Wilson seeks to provide a corrective by introducing an invigorating dose of common sense into the discussion. His first message is that "we need not retreat" in the face of cultural relativism. He points out that even if examples of moral confusion abound, most of us continue to experience the world as a field of moral choices. Even if "some of us have tried to talk ourselves out of it," the palpable reality of our moral sense nevertheless continues to assert itself in daily life. "It is," he writes, "as if a person born to appreciate a golden sunset or a lovely song had persuaded himself and others that a greasy smear or a clanging gong ought to be enjoyed as much as true beauty." The pose of moral incompetence is entirely artificial and, if we are honest, unsustainable. We turn to words like "justice," "equity," "right," and "wrong" because they address the reality of our experience. "If we purged our discourse of such terms," Mr. Wilson observes, "the only difference between Tiny Tim and Scrooge would be their age."

The Moral Sense is far from being anti-intellectual. But it is, in part, a cautionary tale about the dangers of taking intellectuals, especially academic intellectuals, too seriously. Given the presumption that education will broaden one's perspective, it is curious that the chief danger is a narrowing of horizons. The peculiar combination of arrogance and despair that seems characteristic of *homo academicus* today breeds a remarkable obtuseness about many important questions. Mr. Wilson puts it thus: "Someone once remarked that the two great errors in moral philosophy are the belief that we know the truth and the belief that there is no truth to be known. Only people who have had the benefit of higher education seem inclined to fall into so false a choice." It is a sobering thought that last year in the United States, some thirteen million students partook of that benefit.

Mr. Wilson writes first of all as a social scientist. But *The Moral Sense* displays a closer and more sympathetic acquaintance with the classic texts of moral philosophy than do most "professional" examples of the genre. The phrase "the moral sense" comes from the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson; but the chief philosophical sources for Mr. Wilson's argument are Hutcheson's most famous pupil, Adam Smith—especially his theory of moral sentiments—and Aristotle's discussion of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. We are used to speaking of moral *concepts*. But in fact morality has much more to do with *dispositions* than concepts or rules. This is one of Mr. Wilson's chief points. Following Aristotle, he argues that the essence of morality consists in liking and disliking the right things. "Pleasures and pains," Aristotle writes, "are the things with which moral virtue is concerned." Hence being well educated means partly being taught to like and dislike the right things. The Aristotelian position is eminently empirical: Moral behavior is largely a function of habit. "We become just," Aristotle writes, "by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. . . . In a word, our moral dispositions are formed as a result of the corresponding activities."

But while Mr. Wilson follows Aristotle in acknowledging the central place of habit ("only an utterly senseless person," Aristotle insisted, "can fail to know that our characters are the result of our conduct"), his starting point is the irreducibilty of moral experience. It is not as if we *add* our perception of morality to an experience that would otherwise be neutral: we experience the world as moral from the very beginning. "The argument of this book," Mr. Wilson writes, "is that people have a natural moral sense, a sense that is formed out of the interaction of their innate dispositions with their earliest familial experiences." Our moral sense thus not only shapes our own behavior but also our judgment of other people's behavior. Indeed, it is here that the irreducibility of moral experience shows itself most

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consistently. Take the sense of justice. Mr. Wilson believes that a sense of justice is part of our innate moral equipment. The institutional correlate of the demand for justice is the law. Today, many academics deny that the law is an instrument of justice. The so-called "legal realists," for example, teach that the law is merely a codification of (inherently inequitable) power relations.

But think about it. We live in an imperfect world, one full of injustices. But to observe that the law is not always just or equitably applied, to point out that certain groups have been unfairly treated—some discriminated against while others receive preferential treatment—is not to discredit the idea of justice. Far from it. It is merely to acknowledge that human beings err in their attempts to be just, as in all else. *Pace* the "legal realists," the notable thing is not how often we fail to achieve justice, but how often we succeed and, even more, how consistently we make the effort. Indeed, the polemical point of legal realism would not even be intelligible were we not endowed with a sense of right and wrong. It turns out that the legal realists are anything but realistic in their understanding of the law.

Mr. Wilson discusses four elements of the moral sense: sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty. The list, he admits, is somewhat arbitrary, and might easily be extended. But a good case can be made for the universality of each of his four examples. Peoples everywhere and at all times express some fellow feeling, at least for their offspring. Some sense of fairness or reciprocity is found in every culture. Likewise, every culture demands some checks on impulse and gratification. ("The universality of rules of etiquette," Mr. Wilson comments, "probably reflects their value as a way of signaling the existence of self-control.") And the idea of binding obligation—for example, in the repayment of debts—is found in some form everywhere. Of course, to say that the moral sense is universal is not to say that it expresses itself in the same way in every culture: to assert the universality of the moral sense is not to deny cultural diversity. Nor is it to say that everyone is equally endowed with the moral sense. Like the sense of humor, it is universal, but it can be deficient or perverted. We recognize this in our language when, for example, we call someone a psychopath.

Mr. Wilson draws on the anthropological literature and, especially, developmental psychology to make his case. After describing the ways in which the senses of sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty exhibit themselves in various contexts, he steps back to examine the social and biological sources of these distinctively human attributes. Like Aristotle, again, Mr. Wilson begins with man's inherent sociability: man is by nature a social animal, and his filiation with others encourages the development of reciprocity, fair play, etc. Our moral nature, he argues, "grows directly out of our social nature."

A second powerful source of the moral sense is the family. Much that Mr. Wilson has to say will seem like old news to the tribunal of common sense: is anyone surprised to learn that a child's strong and affectionate bond with its parents, especially with its mother, is of great importance in forming character? But this seems like uncommon wisdom when compared with some of the orthodoxies informing public policy today. And of course families are not only sources of affection; they are also important sources of conflict. In this context, Mr. Wilson quotes a perceptive comment from G. K. Chesterton:

> Of course the family is a good institution because it is uncongenial. It is wholesome precisely because it contains so many divergences and varieties. It is . . . like a little kingdom, and like most other little kingdoms, is generally in a state of something resembling anarchy. . . . Aunt Elizabeth is unreasonable, like mankind. Papa is excitable, like mankind. Our youngest brother is mischievous, like mankind. Grandpa is stupid, like the world; he is old, like the world.

Gender is a third source of the moral sense that Mr. Wilson discusses, and here, too,

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much that he says will seem like old (but true) news to anyone not besotted by feminist ideology. Everything we observe, everything the science of psychology tells us, suggests that the moral development of boys differs in important ways from that of girls. This is not to say that one sex is more or less moral than the other, only that each is likely to approach moral problems in distinctive ways. This shows itself, for example, in everyday expression: characteristically, Mr. Wilson observes, "Men speak in order to report, women to establish rapport." Men are more likely to be interested in rules and principles, women in intimacy, consultation, reciprocity. Men and women have the same basic moral senses—fairness, duty, and the rest—but they live or inhabit those dispositions differently.

Since Mr. Wilson is himself a social scientist, it is perhaps only natural that he should turn to the social sciences to support his arguments. He informs us early on that "science supplies more support for the 'ancient' view of human nature than is commonly recognized." Maybe so. But it is not at all clear what we gain by learning that being (say) trustworthy "may have an evolutionary advantage." Mr. Wilson seems determined to explain the moral sense entirely in materialistic terms. His performance is something of a tour de force. And perhaps attempting to explain morality solely in naturalistic terms will appeal to readers smitten with the prestige of science. But by neglecting what we might call the spiritual sources of morality one is also in danger of neglecting—how to put it?—what makes morality moral. Somehow adducing the "evolutionary advantage" for telling the truth doesn't quite wash. This may also be the place to make a comment about style. In general, Mr. Wilson writes well. But his commitment to the language of social science occasionally involves him in unnecessary awkwardnesses. In one place, for example, he tells us that we learn to be fair partly because "we want to find a cost-minimizing strategy for managing joint activities (such as playing with the same toy)." Maybe Donald Trump does, but no self-respecting three-year-old cares much about cost-minimizing strategies: he just wants the toy.

Perhaps the most powerful part of *The Moral Sense* is the chapter called "The Universal Aspiration," in which Mr. Wilson describes the way in which the moral sense was gradually extended beyond one's kin or tribe or nation to embrace all of humanity. As Mr. Wilson notes, "Mankind has a moral sense, but much of the time its reach is short and its effect uncertain." The roots of this extension of the moral sense go back to the Greeks and the moral teachings of Judaism and Christianity. It reached full flowering in the Enlightenment and remains one of the chief contributions of Western civilization to the moral capital of the world. Mr. Wilson is quite right to exclaim that "the most remarkable change in the moral history of mankind has been the rise—and occasionally the application—of the view that all people, and not just one's own kind, are entitled to fair treatment." He is also right to insist that "the greatest and most sustained expansion in the boundaries of the moral sense occurred in the West." It was in the West, and only in the West, that freedom for *all* men became a fundamental moral principle, a universal aspiration. And it is this above all that makes the cozy nihilism of so many academic intellectuals morally irksome. Beneficiaries of freedom and tolerance, they blithely set about denying their foundation. Mr. Wilson is consistently gentle and judicious in this book, but he is surely, and frighteningly, correct when he observes that "the kind of culture that can maintain reasonable human commitments takes centuries to create but only a few generations to destroy. And once destroyed, those who suddenly realize what they have lost will also realize that political action cannot, except at a very great price, restore it." At a moment when a new tribalism is rampant on the political as well as the intellectual scene, it is well to reconsider what recommends the catalogue of virtues that sophisticates like Richard Rorty would have us jettison.

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Who's killing our symphony orchestras?

by Samuel Lipman

The American Symphony Orchestra League, the Washington-based national service organization for the field of symphonic music, has just issued another report on the fate of our orchestras. Its earlier report, "The Financial Condition of Symphony Orchestras," [1] concerned itself with the economic outlook for the field and was distinctly pessimistic. The new report, "Americanizing the American Orchestra," [2] provides, not remedies, exactly, but the optimistic suggestions of a group of experts for carrying our orchestras into the multicultural twenty-first century.

To understand this report, it is necessary to recount some of the recent history of our symphony orchestras. There is little doubt that the long-expected terminal crisis of American orchestras is upon us. For many years the crisis seemed to be artistic: there was no new music being written which could command the love, and therefore the attendance, of music lovers. But whatever problems there were in the past, musicians and administrators could nevertheless rely for audience enthusiasm on the performance of the great classics, from Bach in the early eighteenth century to Bartók, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich in the middle of the twentieth century. The lack of new music was handled —simply and directly, it was thought—by commissioning and performing contemporary works, both to educate and to accustom paying customers to new music.

Side by side with these profound artistic problems was (and remains) the explosion of costs, chiefly in the area of artistic and administrative personnel. Driven both by a desire to provide more remunerative employment for the orchestral players and by the competitive ambition of conductors, orchestral seasons grew longer: even in second- and third-tier ensembles the old standard of thirty or so weeks of concerts gave way to forty- or even fifty-week seasons. The simultaneous increases in salaries for musicians, large though they were, were more than matched by the rise in the cost of benefits. It must be mentioned, too, that fees for soloists and conductors, reflecting our age's emphasis on stars and superstars, skyrocketed, outstripping every other orchestral cost. And last on the list of orchestral economic woes was the so-called "edifice complex," the compulsion to build new cultural centers and concert halls even in the most unlikely venues and often under conditions lacking artistic or fiscal justification. One result of this local megalomania was to divert annual contributions from operating expenses to one-time contributions for capital projects.

To keep these costly machines humming,

1 I discussed this report in "The Cry from the Orchestras," *The New Criterion*, September 1992.

2 "Americanizing the American Orchestra: Report of the National Task Force for the American Orchestra: an Initiative for Change"; The American Symphony Orchestra League, Washington, D.C., June 1993.

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both vastly increased fund-raising (now known everywhere by the euphemistic name of "development") and larger audiences, paying much higher ticket prices, were required. There is a direct link between fund-raising and audience size. Not only do larger audiences raise needed revenues, but under conditions of democratic culture they supply the requisite rationale for philanthropy. Donors more than ever want to have their gifts legitimized; by implication, they also want to confer legitimacy on the continued existence of their fortunes through visible public approval and participation. Thus another cost was added to the orchestral brew: publicity and advertising—transformed into the proper capitalist-sounding word "marketing"—was year-by-year approaching some 10 percent or more of the total organizational budget. The New York Philharmonic is a case in point. In its 1991-92 season, the Philharmonic spent some $2 million out of a $25-million budget on publicizing the orchestra and its attractions. To provide some artistic justification for this extravagance, there was a frantic search for programming (often called "thematic" programming) that might interest an audience captivated more by words than by sounds.

So while the orchestral crisis is not new, it is now indubitably more serious. Of course, over the years, various solutions have been proposed. And, as usual, the sexiest have been those offered by groups of experts whose ideas mirror the "progressive" thought of the day in reports supported by large foundations and government agencies—reports that begin with a foregone conclusion to which the putative "research" is attached for support.

Interestingly enough, the flood of reports on the crisis in our orchestras began with a 1989 publication that hardly mentioned orchestras at all. Called "An American Dialogue," [3] it was financed by a consortium of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the federally funded National Endowment for the Arts. Concerned with American artistic culture as a whole, it made its case not on the grounds of the economic survival of culture but on the grounds of social justice. The contention was that all American cultural institutions must become truly integrated racially, ethnically, and culturally, not only in their personnel but also in their content. (It is not enough to have, say, black musicians: they must also play music written by blacks.) This view is summed up by Robert Garfias, an academic administrator at the University of California at Irvine and a former Reagan appointee to the National Council on the Arts, who has long been dedicated to multiculturalism:

> [O]ur arts institutions seem to say that "you must belong here to enter" and "you must know what you are doing here." For these new immigrants and a good number of other diverse ethnic groups in America there is little or no incentive to meet this challenge. To them our open doors appear as tightly shut as ever. The apparent hostility of our arts institutions to the uninitiated is, most unfortunately, something vividly clear to those outside and at the same time something unimaginable to those working within the institutional network structure.

The sell was hard; the anti-white and anti-European culture bias was evident throughout; and the report made no bones about its conclusion: ". . . if our field considers and responds to the ideas presented in this essay, we can have a profound impact on American society and the forces that are shaping it." The implications for symphony orchestras was clear: transform yourselves or perish.

Then in 1990, the august American Assembly—a public-policy advocacy organization at Columbia University—held a conference at the former Harriman estate at Arden, New York. The resulting publication

3 This report, published by The Association of Performing Arts Presenters for the National Task Force on Presenting and Touring the Performing Arts, was discussed in "Notes & Comments," *The New Criterion*, March 1990.

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was called *Public Money and the Muse*, and was funded, as was the conference itself, by AT&T and the Rockefeller Foundation.[4] Here was enshrined the best thoughts of what passes today for arts-policy seers—among them Stephen Stamas, the chairman of the board of the New York Philharmonic; Arthur Levitt, Jr., former president of the American Stock Exchange, board chairman of the Levitt Media Company (the publishers of *Stagebill* and kindred material), and a board member of the Rockefeller Foundation; Kathleen M. Sullivan, the noted civil libertarian and professor at the Harvard Law School; Dennie Palmer Wolf, children's art-education researcher at Harvard's Project Zero; Kinshasha Conwill, executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem; the aforementioned Robert Garfias; Lewis Waldeck, an official of the American Federation of Musicians (AFL/CIO); and Gerald Yoshitomi, executive director of the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in Los Angeles, who (doubtless to bring continuity to the deliberations) had been the "chair" of the earlier "American Dialogue" report. The only dissenting voice on the panel, free-market economist William Grampp of the University of Illinois, was nowhere heard from in anything that came out of the conference.

The conclusion of *Public Money and the Muse*[5] contains the usual politically correct recommendations: increased government support, unfettered freedom of expression, increased access to the arts by new and under-served communities, and encouragement of artistic experimentation. There is a heightened stress on the now omnipresent term "cultural diversity"; in an earlier essay in the book, Gerald Yoshitomi makes a minatory statement directly affecting our symphony orchestras: "All of our children must hear the music of the world's great composers played by outstanding symphony orchestras; yet we must also broaden our standard definition of who is to be included in that great composers list."

The 1992 report, "The Financial Condition of Symphony Orchestras," was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts; its project director was Thomas Wolf, an arts consultant and the husband of Dennie Palmer Wolf, who participated in *Public Money and the Muse*. The 1992 report is at least superficially less prescriptive than *Public Money and the Muse*. But, in addition to its gloomy financial analysis of the present orchestra world, it raises serious questions about the future of board-member cadres and federal support. Dr. Wolf asks several questions that call into doubt the present modes of operation of orchestras: What justifies the large size of orchestras? Why should orchestras be based in a single concert hall? Why are there more concerts than audiences can support? Why should orchestras depend on live concerts instead of on the electronic media? What is the future of orchestras as white, upper-class institutions? Why is there a shortage of "players of color"? Why have orchestras failed to participate aggressively in arts education? Why are there so few connections between orchestras and the organizations that handle sports and tourism? Why have orchestras failed to makes concerts "attractive" to non-concertgoers? And, finally, why haven't more musicians been placed on orchestra boards?

Dr. Wolf produces no evidence to support the notion that attention to these questions would do anything at all to improve the condition of our orchestras. He is also diffident about proposing answers to the questions he poses. He bemoans but is loath to inquire into the loss of commitment on the part of orchestra board members and patrons, and he makes little case for the continued existence of orchestras as carriers of the highest civilization. What he does manage to convey, and in a mournful tone (perhaps because Dr. Wolf is a musician himself), is the sad prospect of the disappearance of orchestral life as we have known it for the past one hundred years in America.

4 Edited by Stephen Benedict; Norton, 1991.

5 See my discussion of this report in *National Review*, February 11, 1991.

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The latest of these reports, "Americanizing the American Orchestra," was, like the 1992 report, published by the American Symphony Orchestra League. The project was funded once again by a familiar group of sponsors—the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Its National Task Force Steering Committee was made up of orchestra administrators and board members, and was presided over by the Chairman of the Board of the American Symphony Orchestra League. To this group of ten was added Ruben Gonzalez, the co-concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and Libby Larsen and Robert Xavier Rodriguez, both composers. The National Task Force was rather more widely constituted, including (in addition to orchestra administrators, board members, arts advocates, and composers) two officials of avowedly ethnic and minority activist groups, the director of volunteer administration and the chairman of volunteers for the Red Cross in Atlanta, the executive director of the National Center for nonprofit boards, the director of volunteers at a Texas hospital, the advertising director of *The Richmond* (Virginia) *Free Press*, several orchestra directors of marketing, a professor of social work at West Virginia University, two students, the president of California State University, and a principal in the nation-wide head-hunting firm of Spencer Stuart & Associates in Chicago. The project director was Donald Thulean, an official of the American Symphony Orchestra League, and the "facilitating consultant" was William Keens, president of the Keens Company, which provided the project staff for the report. Mr. Keens, a frequent organizer, facilitator, and writer for arts-advocacy publications, was also one of the two writers and consultants for the 1990 report, "An American Dialogue." Thomas Wolf, the project director for the 1992 report, was the "consulting author and advisor."

About which one is tempted to say, "Hail, Hail, the gang's all here." Certainly it is fair to say that the dice were loaded for the new report, and certainly the report represents a new level—even for the American Symphony Orchestra League—of unanimity and elimination of what the sponsors of the report, and those responsible for its text, would likely regard as "elitist" dissent. There is throughout this report a strong odor of left-wing populism—a stunning, and indeed odious, expression of the kind of intolerance and parochialism that last surfaced in this country with the Know-Nothings in the nineteenth century.

The agenda animating this report is clear from the beginning. There are chapters called "The Music Comes First," "Achieving Cultural Diversity," "The Relationship of Musicians and the Orchestral Institution," "Varying the Concertgoing Experience," "The Orchestra as Music Educator," "The Changing Nature of Volunteerism," and "Developing Orchestral Leadership," as well as a list of "Repertoire Resources." The report fills 218 pages, but its content is thin, repetitious, and ultimately destructive of what generations of music lovers have known as classical music and its traditions.

It begins by announcing its "Theme" with a quotation from the black composer Alvin Singleton: "Our greatest challenge is Americanizing the American orchestra. What are we about, if not continuing the great experiment that is these United States, through our symphony orchestras?" And then the real agenda of the report is spelled out:

> Any discussion of "qualities," of course, must begin with "quality." The first and last goal of the "new American orchestra" is artistic excellence. Then, presuming artistic excellence, orchestras may want to consider:
>
> - The new American orchestra includes repertoire reflective of its American identity.
> - The new American orchestra is built on the diversity and vibrancy of the racial and cultural groups that comprise American society as a whole, and each orchestra's community in particular . . . As orchestras strive for excellence they also can strive to establish an environment of inclusion in which they are

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> prized as an indispensable creative resource by a much larger group of people than now play in, work in, or support them. . . .
> - The new American orchestra finds ways to incorporate musicians as partners in decision making and programming.
> - The new American orchestra serves a variety of cultural, educational, and social needs in its community.
> - The new American orchestra is alert to the need to cultivate a love of music in the younger generation.
> - The organizational structure of the new American orchestra enables it to respond to changes in order to secure its future.

The rest of the report is an elaboration of these points.

The "Music Comes First" chapter, rather than talking about the quality of the music performed, is concerned with the composition of the repertoire: here the report finds reason to complain that in the seasons from 1987 through 1992 Mozart was played in 24 percent of the concerts, Beethoven in 16 percent, Tchaikovsky and Brahms in 10 percent, and Haydn in 7.5 percent. The remainder of what the report calls the "top ten composers" were Strauss, Dvořák, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Ravel. By contrast, Samuel Barber was played on 2.8 percent of the programs, Copland on 2.6 percent, and Bernstein on 2.4 percent. The report calls this a "strong preference . . . to program from a limited canon, and to project the sound and speak the language of the 18th and 19th century European repertory." But for anyone who knows about music, it is ludicrous to complain because Mozart is performed ten times as often as Barber, Copland, or Bernstein.

This passage is also concerned with encouraging the performance of the music of such composers as T. J. Andersen, Libby Larsen, and Robert Xavier Rodriguez.[6] To remedy its complaint, the American Symphony Orchestra League report advocates a co-optation of music journalism and criticism, so that the audience might be properly prepared (perhaps "indoctrinated" would be a more accurate term) to love what it had not wanted to hear in the first place. The report also envisions the creation of jazz ensembles within each symphony orchestra as well as concerts featuring such crossover artists as David Byrne and Frank Zappa.

The report then goes on to consider "Achieving Cultural Diversity," recommending that:

> In order to remain a vital and relevant element of American society, the orchestra field as a whole should demonstrate greater inclusiveness and responsiveness to the demographic and cultural evolution of the United States, and individual American orchestras should reflect more closely the cultural mix, needs, and interests of their communities.

"Well-qualified musicians" (note that the term is "well-qualified" rather than "the best") must be recruited from "many racial and cultural backgrounds." Everything the orchestra does must be based on "serious organization-wide self-examination"—a practice that is referred to in totalitarian societies as "self-criticism." The report also urges "diversity sensitive training" for everyone involved in the orchestra—musicians, conductor, administrators, board members, and volunteers alike. In an example of the peculiar kind of hypocrisy that infests these advocacy enterprises—run as they undoubtedly are by health advocates and anti-corporate ideologues—the report suggests as an "excellent resource" the *Guide to Black Organizations* published annually by the Philip Morris Companies, Inc.

The chapter on "The Relationship of Musicians and the Orchestral Institution" urges the integration of orchestral players

6 It is, however, silent here about a much more scandalous omission: the almost total absence of Johann Sebastian Bach's music. Bach is the cornerstone of the musician's and the music lover's music, but the intellectual/academic tyranny of the authentic-performance and historical-instrument movement has meant that he is hardly ever performed by full orchestras.

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into every part of artistic and business decision-making, viewing this as an essential element in the necessary cooperation and diversity in institutional policy. "Varying the Concertgoing Experience" suggests providing the audience with better printed program notes, "oral program notes" before the concerts, and "talk-backs" with musicians, conductors, composers, and orchestral staff, as well as bringing concertgoers up on the stage before and after the concert. It also suggests using supertitles in performances of opera, oratorio, and choral and vocal works, having orchestra and board members "converse" with the audience before concerts, altering the standard dress code of the musicians, engaging stage and lighting designers to improve the overall presentation of the orchestra "as well as to enhance specific performances," and "commissioning video works related to the repertoire for showing during performances." Also recommended are "small ensembles and solo performances during the orchestra concert," "[s]horter, perhaps one-work concerts and concerts with different starting times to accommodate people with different schedules," and "lobby and outside plaza" activities. The report goes on to recommend "incorporating elements of pop culture into some concerts," utilizing film and puppets and projections during the music, and inviting such pop artists as Laurie Anderson, Bobby McFerrin, Pat Metheny, and (once again) David Byrne and Frank Zappa to participate in the concerts through commissions and performance.

As chapter follows chapter, the real point of "Americanizing the American Orchestra" becomes ever more obvious. There are periodic bows to the ideals of quality and beauty, but the overriding goal is to use the orchestra and music itself as a weapon in the politically correct transformation of society. Midway through the report, the chapter on "The Orchestra as Music Educator" makes this perfectly clear:

> Think transformationally. The summation of all these ideas is the notion that making the effort to think in new ways about the orchestra's role in society may open up an entirely new universe of possibilities. This requires that every structure upon which an orchestra is built, every assumption about what orchestras should or should not do is confronted and questioned. How can orchestras harness their primary activity—making music—to move in the direction of playing new and unaccustomed roles? What if orchestras redefined themselves, not as purely musical institutions, but as chiefly educational or social service endeavors with an artistic mission and a vital community role? . . . What opportunities would emerge for orchestras to link themselves with positive community values and outcomes to channel interest and participation in music through those new connections.
>
> . . . [T]he redefined orchestral mission can build on . . . artistic strength to position the orchestra as an agent of education, . . . development of leadership skills, anti-drug efforts, improved school performance, and social outlets for children and youth.

In "The Changing Nature of Volunteerism," the report adds the criticism that though "'minority' populations now comprise the majority in 15 of the nation's 28 largest cities . . . the cadre of orchestra volunteers remains largely white, affluent, and overwhelmingly female." Orchestral repertory ought to be determined, at least partially, it is said, by consulting volunteers from "diverse racial and cultural groups." The chapter on "Developing Orchestral Leadership" repeatedly stresses that today orchestral institutions are group activities, quite unlike the maestro-driven enterprises of the bad good-old-days associated with Toscanini, Reiner, and Szell. Finally, it must be mentioned that the report is replete with unseemly plugs for American Symphony Orchestra League publications and services that, one can be certain, push the official line in even more detail.

What, exactly, is wrong with all this? Should not an orchestra be representative of the community? Should not an orchestra assist in the solution of social problems?

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Should not orchestras be democratically run, with each participant contributing to the policy formation as well as the policy execution of the institution? Are not orchestras in the end the servants of their surrounding communities and the groups that make up those communities?

Although affirmative answers to these questions may seem superficially plausible, I am afraid that they can at best be misleading half-truths. Of course orchestra members, board members, administrators—and even those exalted beings, conductors—come from and live in a community. All these people work, and have always worked, for a living and a reputation made through their music, and in so doing they must appeal to at least some part of their surrounding community or a community elsewhere.

But musicians in their music making are not first of all members of their communities. They are musicians. Until recently, symphony orchestras in the United States and Europe existed—and knew they existed—primarily to pass on the masterworks of musical civilization by providing refined musical pleasure to a largely self-chosen audience. This was and remains the ideal.

Doubtless music reflects the world of its origin. Because performance attempts to replicate more or less exactly an original text, it reflects the surrounding world in which it is performed to a vastly lesser extent. In the case of the greatest music, that world is undoubtedly European; and because of the very meaning of the word "classic," the music comes from a bygone social milieu. Can blacks, to mention just one minority, participate on equal terms in classical music? Of course they can. This is shown by a long list of famed black artists, a list that includes the singers Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, Dorothy Maynor, Leontyne Price, Reri Grist, Jessye Norman, Kathleen Battle, Barbara Hendricks, and Simon Estes. One thinks, too, of the many Asian string players who are some of the most gifted students in our best music schools and some of the best players in our orchestras. They also provide soloists for the orchestras that the American Symphony Orchestra League now wishes to "transform." All these artists won their careers—often, especially in the past, through the obstacles of prejudice and malice. But win them they did, and they have shown that not least in classical music—as it is currently organized—minorities can hold their heads very high.

On a more pragmatic level, there is no reason to think that the report's recommendations are based on any compelling evidence. The core audience—including many young people—comes to concerts because it reveres the musical tradition and because it is devoted to the great masterpieces of music. This group loves the music that orchestras have played now for well over a century and can be counted on to attend concerts regularly and to give money—on occasion in large amounts. The "pop" audience that comes in response to a bill of goods it has been sold by marketeers—the audience that has been cajoled through ruinously expensive advertising—attends once and isn't likely to return. In addition, there is no evidence anywhere that programs of new and unfamiliar music create new audiences. On the contrary, there is much evidence that core-audience members, when deprived of the music they love, simply turn to their CDs.

Furthermore, there is every reason to believe that conductors, boards, and administrators are already busy looking for music by minorities and for minority players. It is a sad fact—but a fact nonetheless—that many such players are signed up only because special allowance is made for their minority status. Even sadder is that such affirmative-action hiring reflects badly on the great credit and honor due the many talented minority musicians who make it on their own.

Above all, the current American Symphony Orchestra League report errs in presuming that orchestras are like clay that can be molded by the liberal potter's hands. In reality, orchestras are the product of tradition, experience, and accumulated wisdom. It is entirely fitting that new music should

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have to pass muster with the past in order to survive in the repertory. That is always the condition for artistic survival. Symphony orchestras are not simply about excellence, for excellence may be about many things; they are about excellence—or the aspiration to excellence—that comes from the fertile combination of tradition and new creation.

What is to be done? For starters, orchestras have to abandon the practice of extending concert seasons simply to provide full-time orchestral employment. The practice is prohibitively expensive and must be curtailed. If the symphony orchestra cannot survive—though I very much believe it can—it must not be kept artificially alive by the corruptions envisioned in this report. Musicians, even players in great orchestras, must be willing, if necessary, to supplement their income by teaching individual students. Not only does such teaching provide income and encourage the transmission of tradition, but it also allows players much-needed rest from the labors and often unacknowledged terrors of orchestral work. This is the place to say that the increasing tendency to use pop stars and pop music must also be resisted—not just on musical grounds, but on grounds of fiscal prudence as well: pop stars are simply too expensive.

And what is to be done about American classical music? There is a wonderful American symphonic and chamber-music tradition, going back at least to the 1920s. It has competed well with the music then being written anywhere in Europe. This music—by composers such as Aaron Copland, Howard Hanson, Walter Piston, William Schuman, Roy Harris, and David Diamond—has experienced something of a revival in recent years. The greatest battle it now faces is opposition from musical radicals in the academy and journalism. The American music of the past is music that deserves to be rediscovered, not to displace the masterpieces of the past but to join them. The needed room on programs can easily be found by cutting down the number of new works that are commissioned merely for the sake of commissioning *something*.

Although the American Symphony Orchestra League report pays lip-service to American classical music, its goal is not to encourage more performances of this neglected body of work. Rather, its goal is to promote music that is as yet not only unheard but unwritten. In short, the interest of the American Symphony Orchestra League report lies not in valued but neglected American music; nor does it lie in musical masterpieces, new or old; it lies in the essentially *political* ambition of changing the structure and attitudes of society through the enforcement of a politically correct cultural attitude. Thus it is no accident that its latest report issues from the same cabal of liberal foundations, uncommitted board members, and opportunistic administrators in and out of government that have brought us the other reports I have discussed. This is an inside network, and it means the art that we love no good.

Finally, what of the American Symphony Orchestra League itself? In a brilliant and condemnatory article about the report that appeared in *The New York Times* on July 11, Edward Rothstein, chief music critic for the *Times*, called the report a disgrace. I concur. And I would add that so great is this disgrace that it provides ample grounds for the dissolution of the American Symphony Orchestra League. The League clearly does not have in mind either the interests of our beloved symphony orchestras and their audiences or the future of great music. One recalls the words of Leopold Amery (quoting Cromwell) to Neville Chamberlain in 1940 in the House of Commons debate that brought Churchill to the prime ministership: "You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!"

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An amateur's love of the English: Lampedusa's "Letteratura inglese"

by Stephen Sartarelli

The predominance, even to this day, of classical humanism in the formation of most educated Italians, or the popularity that opera enjoys among Italians of all classes, may strike us more pragmatically trained Americans as an enviable priority, a happy survivor of an age when traditional forms of culture were still integrated into the fabric of day-to-day life. Yet to Prince Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, author of the brilliant, eccentric novel *The Leopard*, the primacy of such traditions as humanism and opera in modern Italian culture sapped the very lifeblood of that nation's artistic genius. And they had an especially deleterious effect, he felt, on the literary impulse of Italians: the former by imparting to the Italian literary tradition a tendency to programmatic stylizations—such as Petrarchism, Marinism, D'Annunzianism, etc.—which stifled artistic élan, the latter by imposing an aesthetic of overstatement on all the arts from which it drew, especially music, poetry, and the visual arts.

One does, of course, tend to view one's own institutions with a more jaundiced eye than an outsider might. Ezra Pound, for example, thought there was little remaining chance for civilization in the United States and looked with more indulgence on the same Italian culture that so dismayed Lampedusa. Similarly the Prince displayed a passion for English civilization—in which he liked to immerse himself for long sojourns when not visiting it in books—free of the sarcasm and captiousness he brought to his assessments of the Italian, and particularly Sicilian, culture in which he lived. For this and other reasons, his *Letteratura inglese*,[1] a two-volume, nearly eight-hundred-page survey of English literature from its beginnings up to the moderns, written in 1953-54 for a private course, presents an especially fresh picture of a tradition which, though one of the world's greatest, we tend at times to take for granted. For not only does Lampedusa survey the English tradition from the outsider's vantage of a foreigner; he is, indeed, doubly "outside," being neither a literary professional nor an academic. The "common reader" par excellence, with as vast a wealth of reference as any university professor, he can allow himself the kind of subjective, unorthodox observations that an academic writer, ever mindful of specialized opinions and considerations that might affect his professional position, cannot. Through Lampedusa's eyes English literature emerges both as something *other* and as an object of a very deep personal love and interest; conventional definitions and categories lose their rigid distinction, and the

1 *Letteratura inglese*, by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, edited by Nicoletta Polo. *Volume 1: Dalle origini al Settecento* (1990), with an introduction by Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi (328 pages, 30,000 lire); *Volume 2: L'Ottocento e il Novecento* (1991), with an afterword by Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi (504 pages, 35,000 lire). Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milan.

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whole tradition, for example, comes to be seen as a kind of *alternative* to the outdated classical humanism by which he felt surrounded.

This certainly is novel, since we are taught to think that the English tradition, at least in its first great flowering, the Elizabethan age, was profoundly influenced and even shaped in part by the humanism of Renaissance Italy. Yet Lampedusa speaks very little of the Elizabethans' debt to Italy. Indeed, *Letteratura inglese* gives the distinct impression that in Lampedusa's opinion a knowledge of the English tradition may be considered in and of itself a formation as universal and complete as a classical education, a notion which we, as Americans or Britons as the case may be, would probably never entertain, being within the tradition and forever wishing to complement our experience by expanding its horizons outward. Yet neither does our point of view contradict Lampedusa's essential insight, for if writers from Shakespeare to Ruskin to Pound and Eliot have looked to Italian and Latin sources for an enrichment and at times a definition of their tradition, this only demonstrates a perpetual movement, as it were, toward a "classical" universality and completeness within the tradition. To the Italian Lampedusa this implies a much broader scope than the Italians' traditional recourse to classical antiquity as model and criterion, for that reflex remained within a more or less continuous "national" tradition. The closest Italian equivalent to what he perceived as an English openness to influences arriving from as far away as India or China could only be something like his own broad cosmopolitanism, which included an ability to read French, English, German, and Spanish.

In fact, Lampedusa believed he had an "English" temperament.[2] Whether or not he was right in so thinking—and we are not really in a position to judge[3]—it is immediately clear that he reads English literature with the impassioned curiosity of a foreigner and the loving, careful gaze of a devoted hobbyist. But this is hardly a criticism: indeed, having been able to judge for himself exactly what he likes and dislikes without the mediation of scholastic conventions and their built-in prejudices, he is able to present the material relatively free of preconceptions, and in a casual and always bemused manner that, while it may occasionally lead him away from the path of hard historical fact, continuously sparkles with ironic asides and eccentric digressions.

The Prince, moreover, did not hide his aversion to critics—to academic critics, that is. The author as critic, on the other hand, is a notion he was particularly fond of, and of which he believed the English provided numerous excellent examples throughout their history. Of Swinburne he wrote that in that poet's studies on Shakespeare and Blake,

> [t]here is no theorizing, no erudite apparatus: the work is considered in and of itself, and by reason of its own radiance; the precedents and derivations cited serve only to help one better understand the *uniqueness* of Shakespearean or Blakean expression; and the works themselves are examined with the care and comprehension of one who understands from experience the value of a certain syllable in a certain place and the efficacy of a given epithet.

This could almost be a description of his own approach to literary criticism. In his remarkably sensitive readings of English poetry, for example, especially Shakespeare's, his keen ear and quick wit usually find expression not in the technical terminology of English prosody (of which he nevertheless more than once displays a firm grasp) but in

2 For this and much other biographical information, I am indebted to David Gilmour's *The Last Leopard: A Life of Giuseppe di Lampedusa* (Pantheon, 1991).

3 Though Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, Lampedusa's cousin, close friend, and adopted son (and the character model for Tancredi in *The Leopard*), does say, in his excellent introduction to *Letteratura inglese*, that "*understatement* [Lanza uses the English term] or the masking of feelings was certainly more developed in him than in the average thoroughbred Palermo aristocrat."

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a more colorful and poetic language that makes free use of metaphors drawn from the fields of music and painting. His very brief discussion of Shakespeare's sonnet number 30, "one of the highest peaks of the collection"—where "the sweet repetition, the long, cello-like bowstrokes, the masterly use of deep *o* and *o'e* sounds are marvels to behold"—is a case in point. Nowhere does he cite scholarly authority in support of original observations; when he does mention generally accepted critical opinions, it is usually to disparage them.

Of course such subjectivity inevitably leads to certain biases and oversights as well. In the various groupings and hierarchies that he is so fond of constructing, the absence or underestimation of certain authors is often surprising. One is struck, for example, by his curious omission of Sir Philip Sidney from the first tier of Elizabethans; Sidney he more or less dismisses by saying that "his principal worth is as a certain type of gentleman of those times: the valorous soldier, skillful diplomat, and man of lofty and noble sentiment. His acts of altruism and courage people the memories of English children. He wrote graceful lyrics."[4] Elsewhere, when introducing Dickens, Lampedusa is pleased to include Manzoni among those narrators he terms "creators of worlds"—Homer, Shakespeare, Ariosto, Cervantes, Fielding, Austen, Balzac, Dickens, Manzoni, Tolstoy, Proust, etc.—yet he qualifies this list by saying: "in almost all cases they are artists of a superior order, with perhaps the sole exception of Ariosto." The oddity here is that someone so critical of Italian literature as Lampedusa would consider Ariosto, a writer of worldwide significance and influence, inferior to Manzoni, whose prominence in nineteenth-century Italian fiction is truly *faute de mieux*. So grudging, in fact, is Lampedusa's recognition of Ariosto's importance that nowhere does he mention *The Faerie Queene*'s great debt to *Orlando Furioso*, even though no one possessed of such vast erudition as his could have been unaware of this fact.

On the other hand, from this same very personal and subjective approach springs the tremendous enthusiasm that informs these "lessons" and distinguishes them sharply from more orthodox surveys of literature. At all times Lampedusa feels free to draw from his vast frame of reference and make some of the most unlikely and often anachronistic comparisons, such as his assertion that Donne "can be likened perhaps to a more virile Verlaine, a Verlaine more truly a sinner and more truly repentant." It is this very openness of method that allows him to construct such categories as the abovementioned "creators of worlds" and that which he calls the "angels" of our cultural history: for "angels" to be considered such, "their apparition must be brilliant and very brief, so as to give us gray mortals the impression that a superhuman visitor has cast a momentary glance upon us before returning to his heavens, leaving us gifts of divine quality and a bitter regret for the fleetingness of his apparition."[5]

Such departures from pedagogical orthodoxy are, of course, what make for the most interesting reading in this survey, for it is in such moments that we are most likely to gain new and unexpected insight into literature and the workings of a remarkable literary mind. Although some such observations may inevitably be dismissed, especially by those of contrary opinion, as mere *jeux d'esprit*, others forcefully attest to the high quality of this literary loner's instincts and even contribute positively to a general understanding of literary history. One such case is Lampedusa's insistence on (and great

4 About the *Arcadia* he says only that "the novel is adorned with beautiful songs and mediocre imitations of Italian octaves and tercets; the prose is truly artful but cold and a bit overstuffed with conceits. His definition of character and powers of observation are null."

5 Among the "angels," Lampedusa includes Raphael, Masaccio, Mozart, Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Maurice de Guérin, Shelley, Marlowe, and Keats, who earns "the highest praise."

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fondness for) "minor" literature. Minor authors, "middlebrow" authors, popular writers, and the like, according to Lampedusa, build the foundations upon which the edifices of great literature can stand. Proust's monument could not exist without the preparations made by two centuries of French fiction; likewise Joyce and the English (Lampedusa considers Joyce an English writer for all intents and purposes). Of course one could cite obvious exceptions to this theory, such as the Austrian Robert Musil's great work, *The Man Without Qualities*. Still it goes a long way toward explaining both the lack of important Italian novels before Verga and Pirandello (with the possible exception of Manzoni), and the late blooming of the same in the ground prepared by those two great Sicilians and their lesser offspring.

Another similarly striking perception of Lampedusa's is a corollary to his idea that English literature, from the Elizabethan age forward, has always been a dialectic between "Romantic" and "Classical" tendencies: the English "classicists" of this bipolarity, he thought, were those who looked back not only, and not even principally, to the Greco-Roman tradition, but rather to the Bible, "a work whose importance, even purely literary, could never be overestimated by anyone concerned with English literature." The Prince, of course, was hardly the first to hear biblical tones and echoes in English poetry from Milton to Yeats (and Eliot); his originality here lies in overlooking the more obvious antagonisms between the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman worldviews—especially evident in the renewed cult of paganism in some artists of the Italian Renaissance—and in allying the Bible as a literary force, at least in England, with "classicism."

Yet by far the most emphatically idiosyncratic of the critical attitudes developed by Lampedusa in this work is that expressed in his relentless invective against opera in general and nineteenth-century Italian opera in particular—which he refers to disparagingly as *il melodramma*. Indeed, so apparently fundamental is it to his sensibility—at least in these pages—that it sometimes becomes a yardstick for measuring the worth of an author or literary work. *Melodramma*, needless to say, is bad, *anti-melodramma* good. D'Annunzio, with his flamboyance and histrionics, is *melodramma*; Jane Austen, who has "no daggers" or "poison goblets" in her plots—and is therefore unappreciated by most Italians—is *anti-melodramma*. Leopardi, to Lampedusa's great joy, is also *anti-melodramma*. The opera is said to have forever ruined *Othello* for the Italians. Their sensibilities hopelessly brutalized by opera, the Italians can no longer appreciate "subtlety." Byron stands accused of having inspired, by the very overstatement of Byronism, a certain kind of Romanticism that lends itself perilously well to *melodramma*. Scott's novels share a similar guilt.

It would be a mistake, however, to miss the elements of irony and playful malice in these otherwise savage attacks. Lampedusa, after all, was quite capable of going twice to the opera in the same week. And while he is quite sincere in lamenting the relative abandonment of the other arts (especially painting and the symphonic tradition) in Italy during the great age of opera—that very same nineteenth century—he also does not hesitate to draw a parallel between Elizabethan drama and nineteenth-century Italian opera as similar explosions of talent. He may well have thought the opera to be the lesser of the two *forms* of theater; still, in the comparison, the Italian opera is found only to lack a Shakespeare—a defect of which all theater traditions but one could be accused.

One must also bear in mind that among Lampedusa's limited circle of close friends, three of those closest to him, Francesco Agnello, Gioacchino Lanza, and Bebbuzzo Lo Monaco (who all attended at least a few of the English lectures), were either musicians or musicologists. The attacks on opera—which include some of the collection's most striking displays of wit—can therefore be seen both as malicious but friendly tweaks and as sincere attempts to shock these same friends out of their complacency regarding

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a culture that they perhaps too readily thought to be sufficient unto itself—a charge which, moreover, Lampedusa had leveled at all Italians for their excessive fondness for *le mélo*. Such an intention on Lampedusa's part becomes all the more evident in the assertion made by his adoptive son and protégé, Gioacchino Lanza, that "[t]he larger audience of the early lessons (which included Agnello and other intermittent guests whom we might call occasional because of their undependability) had been drawn more by a curiosity for the unusual spectacle than by a love of literature. Lampedusa rewarded them with his invective against opera."

Lampedusa, moreover, was highly critical by his very nature. In this respect his harsh vision of Italy—with its Molochian melodrama, its decrepit humanism, its histrionic and weak-livered inhabitants—is not unlike Forster's relentless attacks on British hypocrisy and smugness or Baudelaire's denunciations of vulgarity and meanness in a Paris most of us tend to romanticize. His was a kind of artistic and critical sensibility that would not be true to itself if it did not include every blemish in the representation of what it sees. And while Lampedusa was perhaps more tolerant of British foibles than Italian, still he spared not even the objects of his most passionate love the gaze of his pitiless eye. Thus Shakespeare, "the most glorious name in the history of humanity," wrote 154 sonnets, forty of which "are among the most sublime works of world literature," but over half of which seemed to him "devoid of aesthetic value." More than a few of the major figures in the English tradition are called to task for their inadequacies. G. B. Shaw, for one—and for a flaw that Lampedusa saw in much of Italian literature, i.e., a *programmatic* aesthetics—is said to have "sinned against art."

The supreme self-assurance implicit in such bold and far-reaching cultural pronouncements clearly springs from a feeling of ease and comfort, of being at home in the world of art and letters, despite the absence of any professional confirmation of the writer's qualifications. So confident felt Lampedusa with the subject of literature that he did not hesitate to mix fiction and fact on many occasions, such as in his fanciful reconstruction of Shakespeare's life through a reading of the sonnets and plays, and in his brief biographies of Shelley, Byron, and others; elsewhere his retelling of the dispute between Hilaire Belloc and Sir Charles Oman over military tactics in the Peninsular War contains a number of entirely fabricated details. Yet these inventions in no way compromise the quality of Lampedusa's presentation; on the contrary, they often serve to create an effect that only better helps him to get his point across. Most important, they anticipate the very sort of blend of truth and fantasy manipulated to such masterly effect in his only novel, *The Leopard*.

The English lectures, which he began writing in late 1953 and finished in September 1954, were arguably Lampedusa's first steps out of the literary isolation in which he had spent his entire life. Having previously been able to share his vast literary culture only with his wife, Licy, and his cousin Lucio Piccolo, a poet and fellow "gentleman scholar," Lampedusa agreed to write the lessons most likely at the promptings of his wife. Yet they were not written, as is commonly thought, to enlighten his circle of friends (though some of these may have attended a few lessons), but to provide a promising young poet and then law student, Francesco Orlando, with a literary background he might not otherwise have obtained. Gioacchino Lanza is rather clear about this:

> Biographers and reporters of the *caso Lampedusa* have often spoken of a course of lectures given to a group of young people, a kind of coterie gathered round the man who had read everything. This is a distortion of the truth. The lessons were written and given for Orlando alone, and clandestinely read by me in blocks that Giuseppe used to hand over to me with orders of strictest secrecy and the promise to give them back. The group lessons were in fact very few, concentrated at the start of the

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> course, and constituted no more than ten per cent of the whole; and even those were attended by no more than two or three people in addition to Francesco and me. The *pluralis majestatis* addressed to the class, the many plural invitations to read this or that work, are pure literary invention.

In these thrice-weekly lessons, Orlando would often read the pages aloud while Lampedusa looked on, slyly observing the surprised reactions of the young man and anyone else who might be present. Though more than once he assured his students that his notebooks would be destroyed as soon as they left the room, he apparently never had any intention of carrying out the threat. As the lessons wore on, many changes came to Lampedusa's world, and in 1954, prompted in part by cousin Lucio's sudden "official" success as a poet, he began to write *The Leopard*. This understandably began to sap some of his energy and enthusiasm for the lessons, a drain which carried over to the course in French literature that he gave Orlando when the English course was over.

But the narrative impulse is already there in the lessons. Though he occasionally turned to *The Cambridge History of English Literature* for help, Lampedusa culled most of the information for them from his own memory and repeatedly saw fit to add his own wry analyses and anecdotes (sometimes fashioned out of whole cloth) to the standard literary-historical material. To turn from the lessons to his novel, it was thus only a matter of redirecting the same passion. For through the wit, melancholy, and above all the enthusiasm that he put into writing his lectures, Lampedusa indirectly gives us a glimpse of what would drive a man to write his first novel after a life spent politely absorbing culture at his leisure: not the desire to commemorate a lost world, but the sheer love of art. The love, in the richest sense, of an *amateur*.

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Reflections on English literature
by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: *The following selections from* Letteratura inglese *are for the most part fragments of longer, more continuous discussions. Eschewing of necessity any attempt to represent the text as it stands in the original, I have chosen above all those passages where Lampedusa digresses from the more standard literary-historical material of his lectures. Since this often involved removing passages from their contexts, here and there I was forced to add a word or two for reference, or to elide irrelevant references. Yet rather than burden the present text with brackets around my editorial additions or subtractions (which are in any case minimal and purely functional), I have chosen to incorporate them directly into Lampedusa's text. Likewise the breaks between sections and the extra spacing between paragraphs, as well as the section titles, are almost always my own.*

—Stephen Sartarelli

These notes are nothing more than the residue, the precipitate of thirty years of disorganized reading filtered through a brain notorious for its forgetfulness.

Therefore you have little to hope for.

Beginnings

It is said that *Beowulf* is a work with passages of great beauty, full of barbaric pride and pervaded, despite its Christian veneer, by that sense of fatalism and ineluctable universal ruin typical of primitive Germanic literatures.

I haven't read it.

In *The Ruined Burg*, to my mind, three important themes of English poetry are prefigured: the sea, whose waters and winds permeate all English poetry (Raleigh, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Shelley, Kipling); the attitude of disinterest and understanding toward the unfortunate, the downtrodden, the *underdog*[1] —not a Christian but a "sporting" attitude, which will find admirable expression a few centuries later in *Piers Plowman* and will reappear in Shakespeare and in Dickens; and that Romantic indulgence and delight in the spectacle of ruins, which will later people English parks, and even the garden of Villa Igea, with artificial ruins and bogus tombs.

Elizabethan England

A land of shepherds and artisans, but also of pirates and merchant seamen quick to draw the sword to safeguard their gains or to steal those of others. A land where a happy circumstance of history created a group of pre-Nietzcheans steeped in a Renaissance amoralism that had found its way into young and bestially vivacious flesh.

1 In English in the original.

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The "Elizabethan man," whether soldier or poet, statesman or merchant, Catholic, Anglican, or Calvinist, is one of the most appealing, most gifted, most redoubtable living specimens ever to have been created.

That race of supermen brimming with talent and devoid of virtue, such as Hitler dreamed of creating, was produced by a fruitful conjunction of heavenly bodies, that is, by historical circumstances almost entirely without precedent.

These people speak a language already formed and consolidated. Elizabethan English hardly differs from Victorian English: an extremely rich language, like all hybrid languages, it was forced by religious controversy to express every abstraction and enriched with concrete terms by its use in commerce. It is also a language not yet worn out by a superabundance of fiction, a language waiting for the right artists to make it express what it is capable of saying, to transform into energy what may seem mere coarseness, to draw elegance from fresh voices still smelling of the countryside.

Elizabethan literature

Never have we witnessed—not in the age of Pericles, nor in the age of Dante, nor later in Weimar Germany or Paris—so great a number of ingenious talents in so brief a period of time.

All Elizabethan works of literature are *tense*—and by this I mean they were born vibrant, of restless minds.

Elizabethan drama, Italian opera

Superficial as such comparisons may be, it is nevertheless interesting to draw a parallel between Elizabethan drama and nineteenth-century Italian opera.

The points of contact are many, the point of contrast only one. In both genres of drama we find an extraordinarily vast collection of tremendously gifted authors. In both cases, Italy and England, these authors are not only ingenious but astoundingly prolific. In both countries dramatic production was subject to the same laws, determined by the authors' talents and the pressure to produce: sublime works of art exist alongside dreadful works by the same author, and first-rate pages sometimes appear in works of very poor quality. In both cases the public followed with invariable enthusiasm the good, the less good, and the bad that was served up to them. In Italy and England, the theater faithfully mirrors contemporary society.

These are the points of contact.

The point of contrast is that Italian opera never had its Shakespeare.

Shakespeare

The Sonnets are not in the Italian form; they do have fourteen lines but these are arranged in three *abab* quatrains and end with a rhymed couplet. This formula has its merits and its drawbacks. It permits a consistent flow of rhythm and color in the first twelve lines; at the end, however, it creates a violent break, and the last two lines have the effect of an afterthought, the moral of the fable. Almost always, one can, one must, I daresay, dispense with reading them. The poetic potential of the Shakespearean sonnet is contained in twelve lines.

Sonnet 40 is a miracle: one of the purest (poetically speaking), most sustained cries of love that exist: an absolute devotion expressed in elementary shouts. The word "love" is repeated eight times in it, and serves as a *basso obbligato* to the lament.

Sonnet 94 is a thing of great and thoughtful beauty. It seems, however, placed outside the story. Actually, it seems to sing the praises of a young actor and is in fact the strongest argument in support of the Willie

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Hughes theory—unless one were to connect it to the preceding sonnet, number 93, and take it for a perverse and rather craven compliment to the young earl for acting the part of the faithful "wife" so well. In certain moral abysses, anything can happen. This hypothesis (which just now occurred to me) seems plausible. Number 95, come to think of it, actually confirms it, by railing against those who would speak ill of the beloved for his "sins."

The pitiless number 129 expresses the final detachment from carnality. Surely when the lustful come forward for the Last Judgment, they shall hear the Angel utter these definitive lines, which brand the flesh as useless and inherently disgusting. The poem's technique is surprising: these are no longer tolling bells, but hammer-blows. The internal rhymes, the alliterations, the thunder of the final rhymes create an atmosphere of paroxysm, and the sonnet staggers off to Hell, which is in fact its closing word.

To me the sordid story of these Shakespearean loves seems rather clearly told in the Sonnets. This clarity becomes all the greater when one considers that the order in which they were published and are still read was certainly not the order in which they were composed. It was almost entirely concocted by Thorpe and corresponds to logical necessities only in its broad outlines. Were an editor to put back in place many sonnets that are obviously out of order, he would compose, without adding so much as a comma, Shakespeare's most sorrowful tragedy.

Of the 154 sonnets, about eighty seem to me devoid of aesthetic value (none, however, is merely rhetorical exercise, as many prudish critics have argued); thirty more contain some beautiful lines; the other forty are among the most sublime works of world literature. A very high percentage, therefore—surpassed only, perhaps, by Leopardi's *Canti*, which enables us to place the Sonnets among the three or four most exceptional collections of lyrics.

Olivier's magnificent *Henry V* showed us an Elizabethan performance hall, but presented a rather muted picture of it. These theater-inns were situated on the right bank of the Thames, which at the time was entirely rural, a stone's throw from the port. And the audience was for the most part made up of sailors, dockers, tavern-keepers, and women of ill repute. A theater director at that time was something like a cross between a brothel owner and a mafia chieftain today. The sailors were all, or at least had recently been, pirates. It was they who had sacked Cadiz, who had butchered the Spaniards of the Armada shipwrecked on the coasts of Ireland, and who not long before each performance committed the most unspeakable horrors against the Spanish colonies of Central America. Magnificent specimens of adventurers, they would, without the slightest qualm or hint of politeness or fear, draw their daggers at the very slightest provocation. In 1597, the year, that is, of *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar*, there were nine murders resulting from brawls in London's two theaters. Almost every performance was preceded by the slaughter of a calf onstage by an actor, a bloody scene that the public was particularly fond of. The unbridled sexuality had no limits, and people copulated right in the audience. When they didn't like a particular actor or play, they didn't just voice their disapproval, but threw carcasses of dogs and cats onto the stage, or dead rats (those great big rats of the port of London), or, out of kindness, eggs and rotten fruit.

Gentlemen and other well-bred people also frequented the theaters, but in the same spirit in which they went to brothels, and always accompanied by armed servants. If ever the Queen or Lords really wanted to see a play, they would have it performed at the palace.

It was a theater not so much of the people as of the plebes, not so much of the plebes as of the rabble.

We must not forget this, for it helps to explain and excuse the excesses and horrors of many Elizabethan plays, the coarseness of many scenes, even in Shakespeare, and the

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vulgar, insufferable jokes of almost all the jesters. This blend of the most brutal comicality with the loftiest drama was a social and economic necessity of the English (and Spanish) theater of that time. It has been one of the great paradoxes that this blend should have been accepted by the Romantics as artistic canon, and that an attempt was made to impose it on the well-bred audiences of France and Germany, who had already absorbed the civilization of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In England, in fact (where it was already an old story), the experiment was not even attempted; and in any case, it failed everywhere.

It's true that the characters in *Romeo and Juliet* are all of a piece. But the Gods too are immutable and always embody the same passions; and Juliet, Romeo, Mercutio, and the Nurse have become part of our mythology, like the Gods: ever fresh, ever young, ever the same, with no chance of wrinkles.

I should also like to point out that in Mercutio, Shakespeare, to our great fortune, has handed down to us the speech, temperament, and fancy of an Italian gentleman of the Renaissance, one of those whose features have been conveyed to us by Titian and Lorenzo Lotto, but whose soul and speech the infamous Italian literature of the Cinquecento neglected to pass on. (Except, *perhaps*, for a few hints in the *Orlando Furioso*.)

One can, in Shakespeare, find creatures of *equal* grandeur to Falstaff—but not *greater*.

The Prince's betrayal of the old man, his peerless friend, is too painful to dwell on at length; Shakespeare himself sensed this and gets it over with in a few words. To excuse, from an artistic point of view, this event, which stands as the blackest page in English history—which is saying more than a little—we must point out that what makes it memorable is the fact that it brings to the stage, for the first time, an instance of the notorious hypocrisy of the British. It is easy to see who embodies Shakespeare himself in *Henry IV*: Falstaff, obviously. Here the poet has portrayed himself from a single point of view: that of the tavern wit and boon companion. (But is this one-sidedness even true? Have we not seen in the Sonnets a strange —for other reasons—and similar friendship between an older man and a socially superior young man, which ended in a dark and final betrayal?)

Much Ado About Nothing seems to me sheer wordplay. Let this not be taken, however, as a negative assessment. Sheer wordplay, the pleasure of conversing, the delight of listening, the satisfaction of appreciating the supreme skill shown in interweaving wit and banter, images evoked from words and not words from images . . . Nine-tenths of Goldoni are precisely this, and ten-tenths of Ariosto. And later, in England, Sir Thomas Browne. And they are great writers; just as *Much Ado About Nothing* is a great play. A delight to read, an even greater delight to see performed. One leaves the theater cheered up, with swirls of exquisite words, like fireworks, before one's eyes. Then one forgets all about it.

Much is said of Shakespeare's cult of Italy. And when they speak of this, they include *Much Ado About Nothing* in the list. They are wrong. The comedy takes place in Messina, it's true. It would, however, be difficult to imagine anything less Italian (let alone less Sicilian) than what takes place. The characters are for the most part very pleasant stateless persons; the only two (who are the best) with any national attributes are conspicuously English: the two excellent and honest policemen, Dogberry and Verges. If only the policemen of Messina were like them!

Whenever you give a tailor material for an overcoat, he invariably finds a way to come up with a little cap for his son. From the sumptuous stuff of which Falstaff was made, Shakespeare managed to come up with Dogberry. You can feel it: he's all wool, soft and warm; the pattern is the same: relaxing and cheerful. But he's a little cap all the same.

And the humor, the witticisms, the repartee, the backbiting, the gossip, the retorts, and the endearments exchanged by Beatrice and Benedick are among the sharpest, most

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graceful imaginable. Bubbly bubbles of champagne. But the stomach remains empty.

As Shakespeare says in sonnet 144 and Josephine Baker reasserts in her famous song, every one of us has "two loves." And both of them true. One is official, consecrated, conjugal, legitimate, admissible, and conformistic. The other is secret, sinful, adulterous, illegitimate, clandestine, and scandalous. Thus Louis XIV had as his mistress the beautiful, intellectual, and elegant Mme Pompadour (actually she wasn't legitimate, but she certainly was official), but he also loved the young tarts that used to be brought to him at the Parc aux Cerfs. Others keep a public harem, the favorites of which are called Bartók, Brahms, Mozart, and Wagner, yet they swoon under the caresses of *The Merry Widow*. Chateaubriand admired Béranger; and Baudelaire, in secret, read Paul de Kock. And they were all within their rights.

I too am one of this illustrious number. My (intellectual) wife is named Hamlet; my mistresses, whom I keep publicly in mink furs, custom-made cars, and Bulgari rubies, are Cordelia, Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, and Sir John.

Yet in a little apartment on the outskirts of town I have a kept little woman, a dressmaker, who everyone says is homely, and who is content with a station-wagon, a rabbit-fur, and zircon. And when I'm with her Hamlet seems feckless, Cordelia a bit cold, Desdemona a downright silly goose, Lady Macbeth a bit quick with the hand, and Sir John, well, a bit too paunchy.

My back-street love is *Measure for Measure*.

And if somebody told me that all of Shakespeare's works had to perish except one, which I must choose myself, first I should try to kill the monster making me this proposal; then, if I didn't succeed, I should try to kill myself; and if I didn't succeed at that either, then, in the end, I would choose *Measure for Measure*.

Most critics, while concurring in their admiration of its unequaled stylistic splendor, reproach *Measure for Measure* for being "pessimistic" (we must all be optimists, willy-nilly), and find the ending "absurd and immoral." They classify it among the author's second-rate plays, and express irritated surprise at finding it to be contemporary with his greatest works.

Swinburne, who was a true poet, said on this subject that they were "monstrous asses, in that they are asses without ears." Which to me seems to put that question to rest.

Measure for Measure, even as it marks one of the summits of Shakespeare's art, undoubtedly also marks the lowest point of his psychological depression. He was feeling worse when writing *Measure for Measure* than when writing *King Lear* or *Macbeth* or *Timon of Athens*. For in these latter tragedies he still found the strength to get angry and inveigh. In *Measure for Measure* he is so dejected that it all seems natural to him. He has touched rock bottom.

Guglielmo, re de' poeti da l'ardua fronte serena.[2]

The line is Carducci's. It's his Thousand and First howler.

Othello (which is the least of the four great tragedies,[3] if we want to indulge in this silly game of weighing dinosaurs in grams) has had the misfortune of being the locus of two misunderstandings, which for Italians become three misunderstandings. The first is that it has been cast in a racial light stemming from the bad English translation of the Italian tales from which Shakespeare drew his story. The Moor of Venice, for Cinzio, was not a moor at all but rather a signor Moro, an extremely common last name (like Moroni and Moretti) in the area of Bergamo. Even today, truckers in Lombardy, the Veneto, and the Piedmont will call out, "Ciao, bella mora," to any non-blonde girl

2 "William, king of poets, with arduous yet untroubled brow."

3 The other three being *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*.

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they might run across.[4] And had that unknown English translator been able to witness one of these encounters on the motorways, the drama might have turned out far more pathetic and the figure of Desdemona much less extravagant. But there is nothing to be done about this: Shakespeare swallowed the literary blunder whole, and from the earliest lines (line 66 in Act I, Scene 1, to be exact), Othello is already referred to as "the thick lips."[5]

The second misunderstanding is more serious. Literary critics have never been military officers, and military officers (career officers, that is) are never, ever, literary critics. For this reason, nobody has ever realized that while Iago is (obviously) a very bad fellow, he is not Satan, the being who loves evil for evil's sake, etc. He is merely an officer who has been passed over for promotion, and to get a good sense of the point to which a person in such a circumstance can be led by bitterness and envy, one need only spend fifteen minutes in a batallion mess hall after the *Military Gazette* has arrived bearing the unhappy news. In *Othello*, as in every other work of Shakespeare's, there are no symbolic characters: there are a given number of men and women who suffer, struggle, and die, like all of us.

The third misunderstanding, as I alluded above, is more specifically Italian, and is an aggravation of the second. For 99 percent of Italians, Othello is the name borne by a tenor for three hours on the stage. Indeed, the Moor's name is far more often associated with the name of Tamagno or Marconi[6] (not Guglielmo) than with Shakespeare. Therefore, it is to Boito's libretto that we must turn if we are to know the opinion of the upper-middle tier of Italians.

This libretto has far greater literary substance than almost all of Verdi's others. That goes without saying. But it does not alter the fact that it is fundamentally flawed, that it seriously maims and deforms the entire drama. It maims it by amputating the entire first act, in which Shakespeare (who was a bit sharper than Boito) sets down all the conditions for the tragedy to follow: it amputates the indispensable scenes of Iago's envy, and, more important, cuts out Brabantio's warning to Othello, which will play so great a part in the latter's frenzies of rage: "She has deceived her father, and may thee."

On the other hand Boito, that quintessence of Romanticism, was quite content to plunge headlong into the Iago-Satan hypothesis: he was, after all, the man who had sung (so to speak) of the Magus Troll who "sulla ventraia tien la mannaia"[7] and who loved to repeat to every sort of Italian audience the famous line: "bimbi cacciatevi sotto il lenzuol che viene Troll."[8] And since in Shakespeare's text he found nothing to justify his apocalyptic view of Iago's character, he set about creating this Satan himself and concocted the famous "Credo," which is the least Shakespearean, the least Iagian—the least human—thing a Romantic fifty years behind the times could ever have invented.

And now the power exerted on Italian

4 That is, "Hi, pretty brunette."

5 Actually, the "literary blunder" here appears to be Lampedusa's. In Giraldi Cinzio's story, which can be found in his *Hecatommiti* (1565), the Othello character, called simply "il Moro," is indeed supposed to be moorish, as evidenced by numerous references to his moorishness (e.g., "voi mori sete di natura tanto caldi"; "questa vostra nerezza") and by the handkerchief, which is "lavorato alla moresca." It is, however, curious to note that there was in fact a Venetian patrician named Cristoforo Moro, who, during a career in which he filled many high administrative posts in the provinces of the Venetian empire, was, like Othello, the governor of Cyprus. In 1508, as Moro was about to be recalled to Venice from Cyprus to assume command at Candia, his wife died in mysterious circumstances, which gave rise to gossip that over time evolved into popular legend. Indeed, Lampedusa may be confusedly referring to this real "signor Moro" in the above passage.

6 Francesco Tamagno (1850-1905) and Francesco Marconi (1855-1916): Italian tenors.

7 "Holds the axe o'er your belly"

8 "Hide under the covers, little ones, for Troll is coming."

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heart-strings by this opera is so strong that Shakespeare's play itself is often performed without its first act, and the actors, unable to blare the "Credo in un dio crudel" aria to the pit so anxiously awaiting it, try to give its equivalent by means of satanic grimaces and boogeymanish make-up. Indeed, when I saw Orson Welles's version of *Othello*, I heard some ladies behind me deploring the "fact" that he had added, on his own, the whole first part of the film, the very same Venetian scenes of Shakespeare.

For Italians, *Otello* the opera has killed *Othello* the tragedy.

The fact is that Iago is nothing more than a mediocre malefactor; we find dozens of similar examples in any governmental, semi-governmental, or private administration, the sort who write anonymous letters to superiors who have failed to promote them. So petty is his wickedness, he neither expects nor intends for blood to be spilled, nor to unleash the tremendous havoc that he does. He wanted (and says as much) simply to "untune" the harmony existing between Othello and Desdemona. It is only due to Othello's temperament, his extreme tendency to derangement, that tragedy erupts. The tragic character is Othello; Iago is the lowly fuse that sets off the explosion.

Othello (at a quick glance) is the only tragedy of Shakespeare's without a comic role. Why is that? Because the comic part is assigned to the "Satan." Shakespeare had so little fear of Iago that he did not hesitate to give him quite a few humorous lines; indeed, if one were to compile a list of antic, mordant, witty characters in Shakespeare, it would be unjust to exclude Iago, who in at least half of what he says is a cousin of Benedick. But it's a saturnine humor, needless to say, bitter and pedestrian.

To my knowledge, *Othello* has never been performed in modern dress. And yet I think it's the Shakespeare play that would best lend itself to such a production. Indeed it would gain by it. It would be wonderfully *changée en elle-même* if it were presented as the sordid colonial-garrison intrigue that it is.

Shakespeare was never in Scotland, as far as we know. Rimbaud had never seen the sea when he composed *Le Bateau Ivre*.

And just as *Le Bateau Ivre* gives us one of the most intense (and accurate) impressions of the ocean, so *Macbeth* gives us a wondrous representation of the Scottish landscape.

This sense of "landscape" that is sometimes conveyed by great *non-descriptive* writers is one of the most fascinating questions that arises for the passionate reader. It would certainly deserve a thorough investigation of its own. That Chateaubriand can make us see the forests which in his day covered the United States or can give us a clear sense of the Roman *campagna*, that Balzac can make us live in the Pension Vanquer, is hardly surprising. They applied their energies to description, used words as brushes and colors. But that Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Verga in the *Malavoglia*, Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Macbeth* can render landscape without writing a single line of description is something that leaves us dumbfounded. There can only be two explanations for this: it is either an illusion of my own, in which case it would be useless to go on; or there are, in these works, hints of landscape, broken up into tiny pieces, into imperceptible dust, though worked with such mastery into the story and the dispositions of the characters that they are multiplied a hundredfold in their effect and create, *in their aggregate*, the impression of landscape.

Tolstoy, who also was not a great "describer" but likewise evokes incomparable visions, used to say that the most beautiful and complete image of the Russian plain in winter was contained in the phrase: "a wooden bridge over a frozen stream, with two boots walking over it alone." That should give a sense of the method I am referring to.

Be that as it may, in *Macbeth* the Scottish countryside (along with many other things) is rendered in full. That landscape so similar to our own highest highlands (I mean the

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Alps), with its red and purplish, nearly treeless heaths, its great ochre-colored ridges jutting out into foamy green inlets of sea, its slate-gray, low-lying, foggy (and very beautiful) cities which, with no suburbs for transition, turn from one step to the next into the most deserted countryside, that nearly perpetual light, never dazzling in summer, almost absent in winter though never *entirely*, that ghostly, bewitching landscape full of sorcery, animated (so to speak) by a population that is nearly mute, so softly do they speak, and among whom, if you are lucky, you can meet the most beautiful girls in Europe (with emerald eyes in faces of milk and rose)—I already knew this unforgettable, fascinating landscape from *Macbeth*, and it caused me no surprise whatsoever when I finally saw and experienced it firsthand.

Beaumont & Fletcher

They are (though it would be fairer to say "Fletcher is," because Beaumont died young and while alive proved himself to be a pure artist) a symptom of the decline of Elizabethan drama. With their perfectly conceived plots, their characters who strike the fancy but not the heart, they are comparable to Scribe and Sardou in nineteenth-century French theater. They pursue applause and success too shamelessly: and they succeed, given that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries their fame far surpassed that of Jonson and Marlowe and was on a par with that of Shakespeare himself.

It must be said that most of their work was produced under King James I, and that with the passing of the great Gloriana, the social climate in England lost much of its tone. The King—a near midget, necromancer, superstitious, and surrounded by corrupt pretty boys (whose portraits Van Dyck painted with scornful mastery), besieged by his Scots, coarse as they were back then and greedy as they still are today—cut a shabby figure. And the theater-going public didn't want to make the effort to keep up with flights that soared too high; they wanted suspense stories produced on stage.

Tragedy was about to become opera.

John Donne

Donne holds an eminent place among religious poets. Among mystical poets, no. Crashaw's rapture in God, Milton's faithful surrender not to divine Mercy but to the divine Will (whatever it may be), Blake's breathless endeavor to fathom the Divine Essence, are lacking in him: he exalts God's merits with sumptuous eloquence, yet does not abandon himself to Him. He has no master. The sole sovereign of this most lofty spirit is Death.

There is hardly any point in quoting Donne or inviting you to read this or that. He must be read in full, or at least in whole collections: when seen as a whole, his disorderly genius assumes an appearance of order, the different parts balance one another, and one ends up looking at a Borrominian-style architecture, with twisting bell-towers and strange windows suspended, as it were, in the void. And above all with vast, endless, echoing cellars in which one seems to hear a roar of raging waters—which we can only hope are not the waters of the Phlegethon. A hermetic figure in whose prelate's slipper one seems sometimes to perceive a goat's foot, he can be likened perhaps to a more virile Verlaine, a Verlaine more truly a sinner and more truly repentant.

Machiavelli & the Elizabethans

The name of Machiavelli is of great importance in the history of English prose (and not only prose). The Florentine secretary crystallized around himself all the suspicions, hatreds, and fears of this young people, who saw him as the incarnation of a

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whole decrepit civilization that could only be their enemy.

In the fifteenth century, English literature's first flowering still lacked an Enemy. Under Elizabeth, the Enemy was found, and he was Niccolò Machiavelli. The legend that formed around him entirely falsified his image: he was made into a champion of the Spanish monarchy and the Roman Curia (when in fact he was a defender of the Florentine Republic and the author of the *Mandragola*); he was charged not only with his own real ideological "sins" but also with the much more concrete sins of the Borgias and Felipe II. This highly well-bred man was transformed into a dissolute and lecherous monster; things got so out of hand, in fact, that the nickname "Old Nick" was coined to mean the Devil, and Machiavelli himself appears in person, as master of cruelty, in the prologue to Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*.

The best part of all this is that *The Prince* wasn't translated into English until 1640, when the anti-Machiavellian rage was already in decline. Meanwhile some patient scholars have dug up more than three hundred citations and allusions to this work in Elizabethan drama long before that date. The explanation for this is twofold: first of all, many Englishmen read Machiavelli in the original, the knowledge of Italian being very widespread at the time and almost *de rigueur* for anyone with cultural aspirations; second, the translation of a writing by the French Huguenot Innocent Gentillet, the *Anti-Machiavello*, which contained numerous quotations from *The Prince* garnished with countless inferences and adornments, enjoyed a wide circulation in England. *The Art of War* and the *Florentine Stories* had instead been translated much earlier, in 1560 and 1592 respectively.

On the other hand, it is known that *The Prince* was the favorite book of Cromwell and the great Elizabethan statesmen Cecil and Leicester, who studied it, appreciated it, and translated it into practice, though always in silence. And they brought all their political acumen to bear in this discretion: Machiavelli is an author one can, and perhaps one must, follow in politics, but only on the condition of denying him publicly —otherwise one is no longer Machiavellian. Frederick II of Prussia always looked to him for guidance, and for this very reason wrote the *Anti-Machiavelli*. It was left to our own Mussolini to write a university thesis on Machiavelli, which had the effect of arousing all manner of suspicion.

The Bible

The so-called "Authorized Version" is a work of masterful prose, severe and dignified, yet not without its passages in ingenuous, almost rustic, language. Its influence on English letters (and on the English character) is immeasurable. Present for centuries in every family, read aloud by the hearth every Saturday evening, used as a textbook in the schools, placed on the bedside table in every country inn, its style has penetrated every pore of the English books that come after it. There are a great many "Hebraicisms" in English, and the inexperienced reader of English novels, even crime novels, is often surprised by certain turns of phrase and syntactical constructs, and ascribes them to the author's originality when they are nothing more than echoes of Ecclesiastes or stylistic mannerisms of Isaiah.

Milton

The great age of Milton, the one that would become legend, begins with his blindness, which became total in 1652. At the same time his love of God stoked the fire in his breast —a love of God which in a Catholic would have found expression in hair-shirts, flagellations, and penance, the sort of outlets that the severity of the Puritan doctrine prohibited. The heavenly visions which, some time before him, enraptured Theresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola, were not there to console those thirsty for God; and had

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they been, they would have been rejected as quintessential forms of idolatry. Faith, the terrible, Puritan faith with no face or endearments—I was about to say with no hope—had to remain enclosed within one's breast and reject all liturgical embellishment; it was supposed to eat one's liver like Prometheus's vulture. "Hence, vain deluding joys!" And with faith came fear, fear of this invisible God, this God of loftiest but hidden designs, fear of being included from birth among the list of the reprobates, fear of not interpreting God's word correctly, fear of Death, entry to the dark perils of the afterworld.

Milton's moment of greatest glory is past. Our times look for immediacy of expression, flee religious emotion, no longer recognize technical perfection. Milton seems remote, far remoter than the Elizabethans, almost as remote as Dante.

A deplorable oblivion this, because Milton is in fact very close to us in his endless inner rage, and must always remain close to anyone seeking greater understanding and wishing to establish a dialogue between his own intellect and sensibility. When, one day, perhaps not too far away, the formidable clash between the two conceptions of existence that currently afflicts us has come to an end, the losing side may find, for example, in *Samson Agonistes*, the great lament and worthy expression of their pain. He remains and shall ever remain the great master of the defeated. And defeated we shall all be. "And when at last, defeated in His wars . . ."

Milton's *oeuvre* is almost unknown in Italy. For us, Milton is a serene old gentleman, lean in the sober elegance of his Puritan clothes, who, being blind, dictates thunderous lines of poetry to his daughters, delicate maidens with long golden braids. We've almost managed to extract an operatic quartet out of this. Luckily his work has not lent itself to the travesties of opera; not a single librettist dead or alive has been able to concoct petty cabals from Milton's Satan or Samson.

The shortcomings of wit

The couplet as a verse form has its merits and lends itself rather well to satire, which for an entire century played an important role in English poetry. It also has a serious drawback, however, in that it forces the author to make a constant display of wit. Thus do entire poems, sometimes of great sweep and length, come to be constructed of nothing but thirteenth and fourteenth lines of sonnets; and as often happens when there is a constant flow of wit, the reader's attention strays and begins to flag. This prolixity of clever quips is a flaw of English literature, and not only of the poetry. Ben Jonson is guilty of it, and even in Shakespeare we find a hint of it. In Sheridan, of course, it emerges in full; it blemishes many a page of Meredith's great novels; it is a bothersome nuisance in Wilde's plays; and it makes many of Chesterton's and Guedalla's essays almost unreadable. And it must be said that in each one of these authors, the witticisms are truly excellent and well-put. Yet there are so many pearls that they might be mistaken for gravel. In Guedalla there is literally one in every line. And the mind soon tires, as the eyes do at a fireworks display.

Literature that is not art

Alongside real literature, the literature that is or wants to be art, there has always existed and will always exist another kind of book that we call literature because it is written with the letters of the alphabet. Such writing is only of negative interest to anyone interested in real literature, being only a reduction, a kind of blurry miniature of the great models (or perhaps, because the great works are the quintessence, the successful expression of sentiments that the non-literary have never been able to evince). Yet to anyone interested in history, it is of primary interest: it allows one to observe the manner in which the great ideas pass into universal con-

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sciousness; it provides the sight and smell of the age in which they were born—whereas Shakespeare, Dante, Baudelaire, and many other far lesser writers make us breathe the scents of Elysium.

Unfortunately this pseudo-literature, while easily available for our own age and the immediately preceding ones, becomes almost inaccessible for more remote centuries. Every one of us can know Liala and with a little effort get his hands on Mastriani and Valera. Yet who has read the Canon Buttà or the collections of the *Poliorama Pittoresco* that filled him with the spirit of the age of the Bourbon monarchy? Tomorrow, anyone who wants to know what "people" thought ("people" being shopkeepers, railwaymen, ushers, and cashiers) during the twenty years of Fascism will read Giovanni Gentile, who won't tell him a thing: he should read the clippings of "Farinata" and Nino d'Aroma's *Canti dell'Impero* ("when we baptized Ras Mulaghietà," etc.).

For my part, with the help of patience, bad taste, and a strong stomach, I have read a lot of this stuff: Sabatini, Michele Neraco, George Ohnet, Liala, Pitigrilli, Arnaldo Mussolini, William Le Queux, Williamson, Bertha Ruck, Motta, Alexei Tolstoy, De Amicis, Zuccoli, Paolieri, Cant, Guy Chantepleure, William Boothby, and countless others. And I have read it with immeasurable profit to my grasp of history and with (indirect) aesthetic enjoyment.

Agrammatical, illogical, hysterical, ignorant, crass, pathetic, in sum, they are the very picture of the Demos, our sovereign and master. One must know them.

Unfortunately, political and literary historians have equally ignored this delightful branch of their studies. The only exception I know of is Georges Delvan, who published two priceless volumes entitled *Les Lectures du peuple français de 1850 à 1910*, which show us dimestore Renans, parodies of Flaubert, apers of Anatole France, poor relations of Péguy—the true spiritual fountainheads of the French people.

This long digression is merely to say that there did exist, during the time of the English Revolution and the Restoration, a printed production of this history, and that Lord Colebrooke has collected many thousands of these specimens, which by the kindness of that excellent old gentleman I have been lucky enough to peruse during numerous visits to his library. There one finds tawdry and realistic novels and novelettes in which one reads of Cromwell slaking his thirst with human blood, Fairfax raping young virgins, and Milton (Milton!) pocketing enormous bribes; on the other hand there are also little Puritan books in which, with biblical directness and in no uncertain terms, Charles I, Strafford, and Prince Rupert are accused of comparable abominations.

Broadsides with madrigals in the manner of Suckling, sickeningly sweet and fashioned in shaky verse; pamphlets with moralizing sermons in which Donne's metaphysical insights and Laud's solemn wrath become pointless sophistries and explosions of boorish rage . . . Clandestinely printed works of starving hack writers who probably lent their services to both sides; flowers of that nursery of fourth-rate polemicists that blossomed in that age and from which would later sprout, by force of talent, the great names of Defoe and Swift.

At the time I took many notes, of which only two pages have survived: on them I find the names of Kynaston, Hall, Flecknoe, Fellthan, Cleveland, and Benlowes. But the majority of these sub-literary writings are anonymous.

And yet. And yet here is a delightfully Baroque line of verse that has just surfaced in my memory; it is by Benlowes, and I remember that it is part of a rather long and equally mediocre satire:

War has our lukewarm claret broach'd with spears.

It may well be the only literary delight in this sea of historical delights.

(This is Part I of a two-part selection from Letteratura inglese. *Part II will appear in our next issue.)*

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G.B.S.: the life of George Bernard Shaw

by Brooke Allen

Seldom can any author have taken Horace's dictum that the artist should delight and instruct as seriously as did Bernard Shaw. The notion of art for art's sake, the guiding principle for so many writers of his generation, repelled him, and he insisted that he "would not lift a finger to produce a work of art if I thought there was nothing more than that in it." All of his plays, novels, and essays are intensely conceived political statements.

It is, of course, a paradox of Shavian dimension that these serious sociological tracts in fact delight even more than they instruct, that they continue to delight, indeed, in an age when the historical setting of Shaw's theories and political credenda has receded into the past. One by one the mainstays of Shaw's worldview—the Fabian creed of "permeation," eventually his Stalinism, his faith in "Creative Evolution" and the "Life Force"—have been toppled; but the iconoclasm, the lacerating common sense, the passionate social conscience, and the insistence upon man's common responsibility for the state of his world live on because of the incomparable wit with which they are served up. "Why should humour and laughter be excommunicated?" Shaw once asked Tolstoy. "Suppose the world were only one of God's jokes, would you work any the less to make it a good joke instead of a bad one?"

The final volume of Michael Holroyd's biography of Shaw has just been published.[1] The work in its entirety is an exhaustive one, and if the use of that adjective implies that perusal of the book is exhaust*ing*, well, that is true too. This is more or less inevitable, for Holroyd's aim was to write as detailed and fully researched a study as possible, and Shaw spent the better part of his ninety-four years writing—plays, essays, speeches, novels, letters, letters, and more letters. He neither drank nor smoked nor ate meat nor, except when his wife insisted, took holidays. He was practically celibate for the last fifty years of his life. Work was his principal, perhaps his only, pleasure. When Holroyd took up his formidable task in the 1970s, he actually feared that Shaw could write more in a day than he, Holroyd, could read, and that he would never even finish the necessary research, much less write the biography.

Fortunately that fear proved unfounded, and Holroyd's stupendous accomplishment in marshaling his thousands of documents is enough, in itself, to warrant high praise. Shaw's life is covered with a scholarly thoroughness that still retains the lightness of touch without which any treatment of this brightly plumed subject would be intolerable. If one tends to bog down in the mire of detail, one is nonetheless grateful for

1 *Bernard Shaw: Volume IV. The Last Laugh: An Epilogue, 1950-1991*, by Michael Holroyd; Random House, 490 pages, $35. It succeeds *Volume I: The Search for Love, 1856-1898* (1988), *Volume II: The Pursuit of Power, 1898-1918* (1989), and *Volume III: The Lure of Fantasy, 1918-1950* (1991).

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the rich array of information. Whether Holroyd succeeds in making Shaw live is another question. "I never knew what a vivid personality meant until I met Shaw," said the actress Lillah McCarthy. "He, of all men, is most alive; not only on grand occasions but all the time." Holroyd captures the man's industry but loses among the great catalogue of achievements something of the vitality that enabled an unloved, ill-educated, and obscure youth to turn himself into the most famous sage and jester of his time, a celebrity to whom an American newspaper offered one million dollars for his final words.

After a monumental study of fifteen hundred pages, Holroyd hazards few speculations about Shaw's place in posterity. The final volume is a little anticlimactic as a result. But perhaps it is just as well, after providing such a quantity of material, to let the reader decide for himself. Holroyd devotes his final, brief volume to a study of Shaw's will and the way in which his wishes were circumvented. Of the four institutions chosen by Shaw to benefit from his royalties (royalties that were unexpectedly multiplied upon the opening of *My Fair Lady* in 1956), only one, the National Gallery of Ireland, received its full legacy and used it in the manner Shaw had intended. The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, the Reading Room of the British Museum, and an association for the establishment of a British phonetic "alfabet" were all cheated of their endowments through chicanery or legal fiddling, in a series of lawsuits that Holroyd likens to *Bleak House*'s *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*. The remainder of Volume IV is devoted to the source notes for the entire biography. Though Holroyd tries to justify the delay that forced readers of the first three volumes to wait until now for any clue as to sources, it is still an inefficient and cumbersome method, and the notes themselves are frequently incomplete and faulty, not to say stingy in the information offered. Holroyd also omits the appendix that would be most useful: a chronological listing of Shaw's plays with details of their first productions.

In looking at the life in its entirety Holroyd chooses a Freudian model that is summarized in the successive titles of the first three volumes: *The Search for Love*, *The Pursuit of Power*, *The Lure of Fantasy*. "In his early years," writes Holroyd in Volume III, "he had looked for love but rejecting this as impractical for himself . . . he then attempted to replace it, through imaginative wordplay, with the exercise of beneficent political power. But here too he had been disappointed, and during the last period of his life he looked for illumination elsewhere." This is the shape Holroyd elects to impose on the life, a somewhat arbitrary choice since Shaw could as easily and perhaps more profitably be observed within his sociological context rather than as eternal protagonist in the family drama. It is true, however, that Shaw's character was bizarre enough to warrant a psychological approach, and that the roots of many of his eccentricities are apparent in his early life.

The Shaws had belonged to the Protestant upper class, but Bernard Shaw's branch of the family had grown embarrassingly déclassé by the time of his birth in 1856. His father, an unsuccessful merchant, became an ineffectual drunkard during the course of Shaw's childhood, and Shaw's mother, Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw, treated her husband more and more as an inconvenient household pet. She turned instead to George John Vandeleur Lee (who eventually shortened his name simply to Vandeleur Lee), a Svengali-like music teacher of some repute in Dublin. She became Lee's minion and disciple, and though Holroyd finds it doubtful that the two enjoyed a sexual relationship, Lee took up residence with the Shaw family in 1866, creating the prototype for the odd, semi-sexual three-cornered relationships that Shaw as an adult was to establish with various couples.

Shaw was an emotionally neglected boy, the outcast among the children of the family. Lucinda lavished love on her daughters, Lucy and Agnes, but seemed permanently hardened against her little son. "Fortunately I have a heart of stone," Shaw wrote in 1939,

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"else my relations would have broken it long ago." The heart of stone, of course, was a pose developed over decades to cope with parental rejection, and the story of Shaw, as told by Holroyd, is in large part a story of that developing pose. Whatever heights Shaw scaled, whatever adulation he received from the world, he was never able to squeeze a jot of approval from his own mother.

Nor did anyone in the family attempt to stimulate intellectual or artistic curiosity from the young Bernard, or "Sonny" as he was called at home. "He had no access to a library and no money with which to buy books," Holroyd says. "Nobody at Hatch Street read." And while music and singing were not only the household business but also its passion, it is an incredible fact that it never occurred to anyone to teach Sonny to read music or play an instrument. He was entirely self-taught in this as in everything, and his eventual emergence as one of the greatest music critics in the language is a monument to determination and push, as well as a form of revenge against his family's scorn.

Sonny attended both Protestant and Catholic schools and hated both equally, calling his first school, the Wesleyan Connexional, a "futile boy prison." At the age of fifteen he became an office boy for the estate agents Uniacke Townshend, work he approached with a predictable want of enthusiasm, and when his mother followed Vandeleur Lee to London—leaving George Carr Shaw for good—young Shaw joined them there in 1876. After a stint of work for the Edison Telephone Company, he abandoned wage slavery for good in 1880, determined upon a profession in letters. With no capital and only the tiniest income, Shaw set out to become a novelist, educating himself for the task in the Reading Room of the British Museum.

His early efforts were not auspicious. Five novels were returned by the publishing houses with uniformly negative reports, typified by Macmillan's summing-up of *The Irrational Knot*:

> [A] novel of the most disagreeable kind. . . . There is nothing conventional either about the structure or the style . . . the thought of the book is all wrong; the whole idea of it is odd, perverse and crude. . . . So far as your publication is concerned, it is out of the question. There is too much adultery and the like matters.

Shaw rather bitterly parodied these readers' reports: "I feel I'd rather die than read it." The quality of his thinking, however, did not go entirely unnoticed; Edward Garnett, who towered over his contemporary fellow-readers in percipience and culture, noted of *Love Among the Artists* that "the literary art is sound, the people in it are real people, and the fresh unconventionality is pleasing after the ordinary work of the common novelist: but all the same—*few people would understand it, & few papers would praise it*."

Shaw's conversion to socialism in the 1880s was a personal and professional turning point. It gave him a *raison d'être* and a religion. "I became a man with some business in the world," he later wrote, and from this business he never diverged. Shaw was not a Christian, and indeed he held that there was "not a single established religion in the world in which an intelligent or educated man could believe," but his character was nevertheless a passionately religious one. He assumed that the religious impulse was not only inevitable, but necessary and good—a questionable assumption, perhaps. He set up socialism and what he called "Creative Evolution" as his personal faiths, and he was later to sum up his attitude toward his life's work in the "Epistle Dedicatory" to *Man and Superman*:

> This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

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Shaw turned to socialism under the influence of Ruskin, Morris, Blake, and Shelley, and became a founding member of the Fabian Society in 1884, along with Beatrice and Sidney Webb, who would become his closest friends (Shaw wrote of his friendship with the Webbs that "apart from marriage, it has certainly been the biggest thing in my life"), Graham Wallas, Sidney Olivier, and Hubert Bland. That same year he began work as a music critic.

Shaw's development as a journalist went hand in hand with his development as a socialist. Criticism was no mere aesthetic display but an exercise in morality and politics. Like Matthew Arnold, he believed that men could become "better or worse morally for going to the theatre or reading a book" and he openly championed the critic's proselytizing mission. "A criticism written without personal feeling is not worth reading. It is the capacity for making good or bad art a personal matter that makes a man a critic." Increasingly brilliant as a critic, Shaw also became well known as a public speaker promoting the Fabian cause. He could hold an audience in thrall for two hours at a time, fascinating listeners with his outrageous rhetoric, his flaming beard, and his dead white face that one friend likened to "an unskillfully-poached egg." His rhetorical skills are abundantly displayed in *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889), which Shaw edited, and his own contributions contain some of the most stirring words on poverty to come out of the nineteenth century, words to rival those of Carlyle, Ruskin, Dickens, and every other Victorian prophet.

> Your slaves are beyond caring for your cries: they breed like rabbits; and their poverty breeds filth, ugliness, dishonesty, disease, obscenity, drunkenness, and murder. In the midst of the riches which their labour piles up for you, their misery rises up too and stifles you. You withdraw in disgust to the other end of the town from them; you appoint special carriages on your railways and special seats in your churches and theatres for them; you set your life apart from theirs by every class barrier you can devise; and yet they swarm about you still: your face gets stamped with your habitual loathing and suspicion of them: your ears get so filled with the language of the vilest of them that you break into it when you lose your self-control: they poison your life as remorselessly as you have sacrificed theirs heartlessly.

Shaw's approach combined activism with the use of the intellect. "Socialism," he wrote, "is not charity nor loving-kindness, nor sympathy with the poor, nor popular philanthropy . . . but the economist's hatred of waste and disorder, the aesthete's hatred of ugliness and dirt, the lawyer's hatred of injustice, the doctor's hatred of disease, the saint's hatred of the seven deadly sins."

In 1884 Shaw finally had a novel accepted for publication: Belfort Bax and J. L. Joynes serialized *An Unsocial Socialist* in *To-Day*, their "Monthly Magazine of Scientific Socialism." They subsequently serialized Shaw's earlier novel, *Cashel Byron's Profession*, while Annie Besant published *The Irrational Knot* and *Love Among the Artists* in her own socialist magazine, *Our Corner*. Beginning to be well known both as a speaker and a writer, the thirty-five-year-old Shaw wrote *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1891. In this polemical work he followed Arnold and divided mankind into three categories: philistines (the majority), idealists (dangerous intellectuals), and the one-in-a-thousand realist or Great Man. This theoretical division was to dominate Shaw's thinking, in one guise or another, for the rest of his life, and the realist was to reappear in Shaw's later work as the superman. His preoccupation with this mythical beast was eventually to lead him into political hot water with his admiration of Force, typically embodied in such sinister personages as Joseph Stalin and Oswald Mosley.

Throughout the 1880's and '90's Shaw's music criticism had been attracting attention, and in 1895 he joined the *Saturday Review* as the dramatic critic, a move that coincided with his own turn toward playwriting as the genre most congenial to him

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and in which he felt he could wield the most influence. Taking up the torch of Ibsenian realism, Shaw's aim was to replace the hack melodramas and farces that made up contemporary British theatrical fare with a new theater of ideas. He entered the ring at a moment when Pinero and Wilde were the most highly-thought-of playwrights: he respected neither. "I cannot say that I greatly cared for The Importance of Being Earnest," he wrote. "It amused me, of course; but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening. I go to the theater to be moved to laughter, not to be tickled or bustled into it."

Shaw was by now himself fully engaged in the playwright's vocation. In 1892 he had completed *Widowers' Houses*, a play that dealt with slum-landlordism, and followed this commerical failure with *The Philanderer*, for which he could not find a producer, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), to which, since it dealt openly with prostitution, the Censor of Plays refused a license. (The play was not performed in Britain until 1925.) *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, with its long monologues and characters who act primarily as mouthpieces for various philosophical positions, set the tone for subsequent Shavian drama and established the distinctive Shavian style. It also established Shaw's characteristic position of externalizing evil into a general, *social* guilt.

> Do you thank God that you are guiltless in this matter? Take care. . . . The wages of prostitution are stitched into your button-holes and into your blouse, pasted into your matchboxes and your boxes of pins, stuffed into your mattress, mixed with the paint on your walls and stuck between the joints of your water-pipes . . . you will not cheat the Recording Angel into putting down your debts to the wrong account.

The biting tone of Shaw's first plays had brought him attention but hardly popularity. He began to see that if he wanted a wide audience he might have to compromise a little in the direction of that audience's expectations; it was no use writing shocking and provocative material if no one came to see it. Thus he momentarily abandoned his "Plays Unpleasant"—plays that "force the spectator to face unpleasant facts"—and made the transition to his "Plays Pleasant". But not too pleasant, for though Holroyd finds cynicism in "Shaw's skill in writing for a theatre that, in the *Saturday Review*, he was simultaneously campaigning to destroy," no one could call Shaw's "pleasant" efforts, *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Candida* (1894, performed 1897), *The Man of Destiny* (1895, performed 1897), and *You Never Can Tell* (1896, performed 1899), popular pabulum. W. B. Yeats's description of the première of *Arms and the Man* should assure us of that.

> [T]he whole pit and gallery, except certain members of the Fabian Society, started to laugh at the author, and then, discovering that they themselves were being laughed at, sat there not converted—their hatred was too bitter for that—but dumbfounded, while the rest of the house cheered and laughed. . . . I listened to *Arms and the Man* with admiration and hatred. It seemed to me inorganic, logical straightness and not the crooked road of life, yet I stood aghast before its energy.

With his early decision to publish his plays in book form, Shaw seized an opportunity to *force* his opinions upon the public that had so far refused him popular success. Taking nothing for granted from his readers, Shaw bolstered the text of the plays with lengthy prefaces and replaced traditional stage directions with discursive narrative. Thus he created an entirely new and still unimitated genre, part play, part essay, part oratory.

Of course Shaw's style could be uncongenial not only to the conventional theatergoer but to some of his most discriminating contemporaries. Max Beerbohm, Shaw's successor on the *Saturday Review*, complained that "flesh and blood are quite invisible to Mr. Shaw . . . to all intents and purposes, his serious characters are just so

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many skeletons, which do but dance and grin and rattle their bones," and Shaw's longtime friend and sparring-partner, G. K. Chesterton, quipped that "Shaw is like the Venus de Milo: all that there is of him is admirable."

A distinct cold-bloodedness both in his work and in his character was off-putting to many, and found obvious form in his vegetarianism and his teetotalism (Beerbohm spoke of, and caricatured many times, Shaw's "temperance beverage face"). Most of all, though, it was in his relations with women that Shaw attempted to set himself above and beyond ordinary humanity. Holroyd stresses the fact that Shaw, unable to inspire love in his own mother, studiously inured himself to the pangs of sexual love and loss, but it is also possible that Shaw was simply less highly sexed than other men. He remained a virgin until the age of twenty-nine, and his forty-five-year marriage to Charlotte Townshend remained unconsummated (though he and his wife did have sexual relations before their marriage). The "affairs" he participated in both before and during his marriage involved a good deal more talk than love-making, and during his bachelorhood he showed a peculiar tendency to launch teasing, provocative flirtations with married women, initiating chaste triangles that re-created that of his parents and Vandeleur Lee. Notable rehearsals of this scenario included relationships with Hubert and Edith [Nesbit] Bland, William Morris's daughter May and her husband Henry Sparling, and his effort, both professional and sexual, to lure Ellen Terry away from her longtime partnership with Henry Irving. Both in life and art, Holroyd points out, Shaw created "a stereotype, Woman-the-Huntress," and himself played the alarmed innocent fleeing her grasp. He glamorized his own role when he created Henry Higgins, who refuses to fall into the trap of romantic love with his Galatea.

> "I wont stop for you . . . I can do without anybody. I have . . . my own spark of divine fire. . . . I care for life, for humanity; and you are a part of it that has come my way and been built into my house. What more can you or anyone ask? If you cant stand the coldness of my sort of life, and the strain of it, go back to the gutter."

Of course, no man is ardently pursued by women unless he desires their pursuit, and Holroyd shrewdly formulates Shaw's method by saying that he "made himself attractive to women by informing them he was attractive—then warning them against this damnable attractiveness." But it seems unarguable that Shaw either feared or was repelled by full-force sexual love. "Everyone who becomes the object of [sexual] infatuation shrinks from it instinctively. Love loses its charm when it is not free: . . . it becomes valueless and even abhorrent, like the caresses of a maniac." His only descent into full-scale romantic passion—his affair with Mrs. Patrick Campbell—ended unhappily and confirmed his belief that "the quantity of Love that an ordinary person can stand without serious damage is about 10 minutes in 50 years." Dick Dudgeon in *The Devil's Disciple*, the superman who is able to make the *beau geste* out of the coldness of his intellect rather than the warmth of his emotions, is as much Shaw's alter-ego as Higgins.

Shaw was now entering his most productive period as a playwright, and his plays became more popular despite his continued insistence on forcing unpleasant realities down his audiences' throats. His new connection with the Royal Court Theatre under the management of Harley Granville Barker and John Vedrenne provided the most congenial working situation that he was ever to enjoy. *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898, performed 1901) restored Caesar after his Shakespearean drubbing to the status of "Great Man," another in Shaw's line of supermen; *Man and Superman* (1903) continued his examination of that theme, notably in the "Don Juan in Hell" dream sequence; *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) flew in the face the neo-Gaelic movement to give "a very uncompromising presentment of the

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real old Ireland"; *Major Barbara* (1905) contrasted Christian pietism with the realities of the munitions industry; *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906) was a satire on the medical profession still wholly pertinent to our situation in 1993. (Sheridan Morley has said, correctly, that "almost all of Shaw's plays are at almost all times timely.")

Each of these plays addressed Shaw's current political passion. His summing-up of *Major Barbara*'s theme, for example, in his defense of its anti-hero, the munitions manufacturer Undershaft, brings up a point that had haunted him for years. "Spiritual values do not and cannot exist for hungry, roofless and naked people. Any religion that puts spiritual values before physical necessities is what Marx meant by opium and Nietzsche called a slave morality." Sixteen years earlier he had objected violently to a plan for "Music for the People" in very much the same voice.

> What we want is not music for the people, but bread for the people, rest for the people, immunity from robbery and scorn for the people, hope for them, enjoyment, equal respect and consideration, life and aspiration, instead of drudgery and despair. When we get that I imagine the people will make tolerable music for themselves.

Throughout this period of intense artistic activity, Shaw's political work continued unabated. Though he always refused to stand for Parliament, he was elected to the Vestry Committee of St. Pancras, holding the seat for six years. "I love the reality of the Vestry," he wrote to Ellen Terry, "and its dustcarts and H'less orators, after the silly visionary fashion-ridden theatres." He was still the most vociferous of the Fabians, rivaled only by H. G. Wells during the latter's attempted putsch of the Society between 1906 and 1908. (Wells described Shaw's political methods cynically: "He got his excitement by rousing a fury of antagonism and then overcoming & defeating it. At that game, which covered a large part of his life, he was unsurpassable.") Though he resisted Wells's move to replace the Society's traditional philosophy of the gradual "permeation" of British society with one of noisy publicity, Shaw was well aware that permeation was in practice becoming passivity. The unwillingness of the Fabian executive to have socialism polluted by trades-unionism had caused it to keep aloof from the birth of the Labour Party, an aloofness that would effectively remove it from the mainstream of British socialism in the new century. The Fabians' unlikely political alliance with Arthur Balfour emphasized their uncertainties, and when Labour gained its first Parliamentary base with the Liberal victory of 1906, the Fabians, still attempting to form their own Party, were not there to share the spoils. By 1911 the Fabian Society had, in Beatrice Webb's words, reached a crisis "not of dissent, but of indifference," and Shaw, along with Bland and three others, resigned from the executive (though he always remained an active member).

Shaw continued to produce more or less a play a year. Among them were *Getting Married* (1907-8), *Misalliance* (1909, performed 1910), *Overruled* (1912; Noël Coward took it as his prototype for *Private Lives*), and *Androcles and the Lion* (1912). *Pygmalion* (1912) was first performed in Vienna in 1913 and had its London première in 1914 with Beerbohm Tree in the role of Henry Higgins and Mrs. Patrick Campbell as Eliza Doolittle. With this play, Shaw was finally established as an out-and-out commercial success. It had been his doubtful privilege up until this time to have the critics deem his work successful only in retrospect. *Pygmalion*, though Shaw insisted in its Preface that it was as didactic as any of his plays, was in fact as witty and passionate a treatment of the British class system as has ever been written; it was also, of course, intensely romantic. Higgins and Eliza had run away with their author, a fact that everyone except Shaw himself seemed to acknowledge, and for the rest of his life the playwright fought a losing battle against the actors and producers, beginning with Beerbohm Tree himself, who attempted to sidestep Shaw's

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unromantic ending. (The producers of the film won their round, and so did the authors of *My Fair Lady*, with Shaw no longer alive to keep up the fight).

On the outbreak of World War I, Shaw adopted a Swiftian role: that of uncompromisingly stating ruthless, often cruel truths. He became one of the most voluble and, in retrospect, perhaps the most trenchant critic of the war. This of course did nothing to bolster his popularity, not at least during the country's jingoistic, anti-German phase before the bloody events of 1916.

Shaw's position had not changed since the Boer War.

> I regard war as wasteful, demoralizing, unnecessary, and ludicrously and sordidly inglorious in its reality. This is my unconditional opinion. I *dont* mean war in a bad cause, or war against liberty, or war with any other qualification whatever: I mean war. I recognize no right of the good man to kill the bad man or to govern the bad man.

He wasted no forum, no opportunity for criticizing and even ridiculing the war and, unforgivably, he heaped blame on militarists of all nations, not only the Germans. British *amour propre* was wounded, and Shaw's refusal to mitigate logic with sentimentality made him much hated at a time when young Englishmen in many thousands were giving their lives. Shaw got the reputation for being pro-German because of his refusal to indulge in rhetoric against the German people, and because of gestures like the telegram he sent to Siegfried Trebitsch, his German translator, upon the declaration of war. "WHAT A HIDEOUS SITUATION CIVILIZATION TEARING ITSELF TO PIECES. . . . YOU AND I AT WAR CAN ABSURDITY GO FURTHER MY FRIENDLIEST WISHES GO WITH YOU UNDER ALL CIRCUMSTANCES."

In 1914 Shaw published *Common Sense About the War*, a pamphlet modeled on Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*. His apparent flippancy horrified many readers, and he was forced to retreat from the pages of the *New Statesman* and to resign from the Society of Authors. With hindsight we can see that Shaw was indeed preaching common sense, and this did not go unnoticed by his more astute contemporaries: Stockton Axson, President Wilson's brother-in-law, believed that "Shaw is often ten minutes ahead of the truth, which is almost as fatal as being behind the time." Shaw knew that the real battle would be to achieve an equitable and far-reaching peace, and he published another pamphlet in March 1919, *Peace Conference Hints*, in which he insisted that the Versailles Conference would have to incorporate an embryo League of Nations. The next war, he said, would be a "scientific attempt to destroy cities and kill civilians." He knew that Germany's healthy presence in the League would be essential for its functioning. In vain he insisted that England should "set the world an example of consideration for vanquished enemies," and said that "if [the Kaiser's] rights are not as sacred as those of the poorest peasant in Europe then the war has been fought in vain."

During the last two years of the war it had become evident that Shaw was speaking sense rather than treason. He regained his popularity and far more; it was in the immediate postwar era that Shaw ascended his throne as sage and prophet, "the World's most famous intellectual Clown and Pantaloon in one," as Winston Churchill called him. Revivals of his plays were produced all over Europe, and his new plays were now received with intense interest. *Heartbreak House* (1916-17, performed 1920) was his Chekhovian presentation of the spiritually hollow prewar upper classes; Holroyd suggests, convincingly, that in this play the values of Bloomsbury and the "Souls" are presented with especial scorn. Once again, however, critical success eluded Shaw, and the press cruelly rechristened the play "Jawbreak House."

Nothing daunted, Shaw launched into a five-play metaphysical cycle. He called *Back to Methuselah* "my Ring," and in it he dramatized his philosophy of Creative Evolution, an implausible mixture of Darwin,

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God, and Samuel Butler concocted to satisfy Shaw's personal craving for a philosophy of optimism. His next play was *Saint Joan* (1923, performed 1924), in which he rehabilitated the Joan he believed to have been misrepresented by Voltaire, Twain, Andrew Lang, and Anatole France into a Shavian heroine, and a specifically Protestant one. (T. S. Eliot complained that Shaw had committed sacrilege by turning Joan into "a great middle-class reformer . . . [whose] place is little higher than Mrs. Pankhurst's.") Shaw received a Nobel Prize for *Saint Joan*, thus ascending to the next rung on the ladder of his apotheosis.

The accession of Ramsay MacDonald as the first Labour Prime Minister in 1924, with Sidney Webb as President of the Board of Trade, proved disappointing for Shaw, who soon perceived that MacDonald was in fact more a liberal than a socialist, and it was at this juncture that Shaw entered the murky political waters that were to compromise him for the rest of his life and weaken his future influence. Reacting to what he saw as the ineffectiveness of the Labour Party, Shaw decided to back Oswald Mosley, who in 1930 presented a bold national recovery plan in the style of the New Deal. Shaw's impatience at the snail's pace of Fabian political progress led him, dangerously, to support men he saw as strong. Mosley, Mussolini, and Stalin may not have had coherent programs or philosophies, but they had the strength and personality to change the world; Mosley he saw as "the only striking personality in British politics." Shaw's long Carlylean flirtation with the superman was coming to a very dangerous fruition, and Beatrice Webb was alarmed by the shift in her friend's sympathies.

> As a young social reformer, he hated cruelty and oppression and pleaded for freedom. He idealized the rebel. Today he idealizes the dictator, whether he be a Mussolini, a Hitler or a Stalin, or even a faked-up pretence of a dictator like Mosley. . . . And yet G.B.S. publicly proclaims that he is a Communist. . . .What he really admires in Soviet Communism is the *forceful* activities of the Communist Party.

Shaw had long written sympathetically about the Soviet leaders, largely to counter the influence of what he saw as Churchill's "Russophobia." Stalin, in Shaw's old formulation, was a realist, as opposed to the mere idealists MacDonald, Snowden, and Kerensky, and in 1931 Shaw accepted Nancy and Waldorf Astor's invitation to join them on an official visit to the Soviet Union.

Shaw's behavior during and after his Russian trip borders on the insane. His immutable philosophy of optimism, confronted with the realities of Soviet policy, retreated into fantasy: "his imagination bleached away all signs of pain and horror," says Holroyd. Shaw in Moscow presents a terrifying parody of Shavian glee. "Our question is not to kill or not to kill, but to select the right people to kill . . . the essential difference between the Russian liquidator with his pistol (or whatever his humane killer may be) and the British hangman is that they do not operate on the same sort of person." A far cry indeed from the unconditional pacifist of the First World War. The spectacle of Shaw's grim gaiety in the presence of oppression and murder is fearful, and shows the lengths to which he would go to preserve his faith in optimism and human perfectibility.

Now in his seventies, Shaw's literary output continued undiminished, though his work was no longer of the consistently high quality of his middle years. Political writing included the influential *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism, and Fascism* (1928) and *Everybody's Political What's What* (1944); his later plays, all on political themes, included *The Apple Cart* (1928, performed 1929); *Too True to Be Good* (1931, performed 1932); *On the Rocks* (1933); and *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934, performed 1935). He also directed numerous productions of his own work, in a style refreshingly out-of-step with the era's Stanislavskian purism: Ralph Richardson remembered being told that "You've got to

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go from line to line, quickly and swiftly, never stop the flow of lines, never stop. It's one joke after another, it's a firecracker." He took an active interest in the production of films of his work, and won an Oscar for his screenplay of *Pygmalion*.

Shaw's political perorations continued to pour out, for better or worse. He called for "Africa for the Africans!" as early as 1938; after Hiroshima he showed an extraordinary clairvoyance when he said that "the wars that threaten us in the future are not those of London or Berlin or Washington or Tokyo. They are civil wars . . . to say nothing of wars of religion . . . fundamentalists and atheists, Moslems and Hindus, Shintos and Buddhists." Yet this man of vision simultaneously recommended Joseph Stalin for the Nobel Peace Prize.

After the death of his wife in 1943, Shaw lingered on, physically frail but still mentally active. In his last letter to Sidney Webb —who was himself aged eighty-nine—he wrote "I hope we have been a pair of decent useful chaps as men go; but we have had too short a lifetime to qualify for real high politics." Shaw died on November 2, 1950, at the age of ninety-four. "I believe in life everlasting; but not for the individual," he had said the week before. His old enemy H. G. Wells's obituary of him appeared in the *Daily Express* like "a piercing scream from the grave," according to St. John Ervine. But the world mourned. Statesmen from Pandit Nehru to Harry Truman gave tribute, and Broadway dimmed its lights. The cremation at Golder's Green was simple, without religious ceremony, and Sydney Cockerell read the last words of Mr. Valiant for Truth from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Shaw the Creative Evolutionist would have been pleased by an exchange heard between two bystanders outside the crematorium. A Cockney woman cried, "We'll never see his like again," but she was corrected by an Irishman: "Madam, we must never underrate posterity."

Shaw's celebrity reached its apex at the moment of his death. Now, over forty years later, we are able to look at his monumental achievements with more perspective and to begin to measure his stature on the world stage. There is no doubt that Harold Nicolson was mistaken when he opposed giving Shaw's house over to the National Trust on the grounds that he would not "be a great literary figure in 2000 A.D." But in what does Shaw's permanent greatness consist? It failed him, of course, in his role of prophet, as it has failed every other would-be prophet of the twentieth century: his conscience was great, his political judgments often untenable.

Shaw will always remain eminent as his generation's greatest quipster, the man who could cut off film negotiations with Samuel Goldwyn by saying that "the problem, Mr. Goldwyn, is that you are interested only in art and I am interested only in money." The excellence of his plays will go unquestioned for many years to come, particularly *Pygmalion*, *Major Barbara*, *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, and *Man and Superman*. He will always remain one of the most important figures in the history of socialism; his eloquence on social inequity and responsibility rivaled Dickens's, and his heart and spirit were very much greater than those of Dickens. Edmund Wilson's description of Shaw's "stirring new intellectual appetites, exciting our sense of moral issues, sharpening the focus of our sight on the social relations of the world" comes close to capturing the man's importance—an importance that lives on in spite of the political folly of his last years.

Shaw inevitably failed his own test: he was an idealist rather than a realist. But which of us can claim to be a realist in Shaw's sense of the word? We are all driven by ideals, and in spite of Shaw's own protestations, it was his idealistic fervor rather than any attempted cold-blooded realism that drove him to achieve greatness.

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Returning to the Founders: the debate on the Constitution

by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.

The publication of *The Debate on the Constitution*, in two new volumes of the Library of America, is an occasion for reflection.[1] Edited by Bernard Bailyn, now the foremost professor of American history, these books are not intended for historians, who would turn up their noses at a mere selection of sources, but for us non-historians. What do we have to learn from the debate on the Constitution?

Most Americans regard the Constitution as an authority, as a success; so for them the debate is closed. Most American academics do not agree. Unimpressed with America's relatively long survival, to say nothing of its greatness, they will praise the Constitution only for its openness, which consists mainly in its ability to inspire new invention. But a debate on the Constitution supports neither position: it shows the Constitution before it became an authority, but argues over its merits as if it might deserve to become one.

The Debate on the Constitution does not include the deliberation that went into it; so next to these volumes on the shelf of any serious observer of American politics will be Farrand's *Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* as well as *The Federalist* in book form. The *Debate* takes us through the period of ratification day by day from September 1787 to August 1788. It contains hundreds of newspaper articles, pamphlets, speeches, and letters authored by both the famous and the forgotten, printed in chronological order so that the reader sees how the debate developed, indeed lives through it in his imagination. In Farrand's *Records* we have the Framers; in *The Federalist* we have the Framer-Founders (except for Jay); and in the *Debate* we have the Founders understood broadly as the contributors to the debate over the American founding.

One result of the *Debate*'s presentation is that *The Federalist* appears as but one voice among many, paper by paper (though not all are included)—a kind of deconstruction that is both good and bad. It is good that we see the many alternatives to *The Federalist*, both for and against the Constitution; and indeed the superiority of *The Federalist* shines all the more in the comparison with its rivals and opponents. But, though first published as a serial, *The Federalist* was intended to be a book and it has the parts and the rhetorical motion of a book. Thus its original context in the constitutional debate as re-created is less than its share in the debate as we recur to it now.

The *Debate* includes a useful chronology, biographies of the participants, and the editor's notes, which inform rather than in-

1 *The Debate on the Constitution: Federalist and Antifederalist Speeches, Articles, and Letters During the Struggle over Ratification*, edited by Bernard Bailyn. *Part One: September 1787 to February 1788* (1,214 pages); *Part Two: January to August 1788* (1,175 pages). The Library of America, $35 each; $70 the boxed set.

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terpret. Keeping to the practice of the Library of America, Bailyn provides no introduction. He leaves his readers as poor, wandering souls, deprived of authoritative guidance. I think I can guess the reason for his neglect. Perhaps he is conscious that anything he might have said would have settled the matter and terminated the discussion, contrary to the intent of the publication. So he left us unguided but free to take the measure of a generation of American politicians. The consequence is not to humanize the Founders, for though they may not be demigods, they are far above us. The contrast with our own generation is marked. To read anywhere in these volumes is to be overcome with a shameful sense of inferiority, in both substance and style. It is to be confronted with the appalling toll exacted on us by the invention of television, by the use of speech writers, and more generally by our opinions and our education.

Today there are two main reasons given for returning to the debate on the Constitution: one is to find the "original intent" of the Founders in order to support the Constitution's authority; and the other is to see how to imitate the Founders in order to be able to redo the Constitution. The first is an academic restatement of the popular respect for the Constitution that I mentioned, dating from the Reagan administration. "Original intent" was an attempt to curb the judicial activism that has caused so much harm to our government and indeed to our common life by inciting the passion for litigation. Eager judges, unconscious of their own ambition and reckless of the consequences encouraged, resort to the courts and have brought us close to a condition in which a citizen is someone who sues. (Ralph Nader's group of suers is called "Public Citizen.")

It was only reasonable to look for a formula to serve as a line of defense against encroaching judges and to make them aware that the Constitution is an instrument of limitation as well as a license to act. But the need to pin down the judiciary, which was the original intent of "original intent," impelled the notion of judicial restraint toward literalness and away from principle.

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The plain words of the document could be held immune from expansive interpretation, but a principle is always open to debate and hence to exploitation. So the literal or positive version of original intent propounded by Robert Bork gained currency over the principled version put forth by the author of the phrase, Gary McDowell, who was an assistant to Edwin Meese (Reagan's second attorney general). Bork's version seemed to say that the Constitution, because it had been a democratic decision, was authoritative (i.e., especially over the judiciary).

Curiously, the opposing view—at least the views of those like Bruce Ackerman and Sanford Levinson—also rested on democratic decisionism. It admitted the relevance of the Constitution to contemporary social problems and took on the the task of interpreting the Constitution: a burden that requires many hours of clerk and paralegal time. This "interpretivist" position held that what the people had decided once it could decide again, and otherwise, and with equal authority. So judicial activism was justified because it merely applied another Constitution—that of the New Deal, for instance—which had been democratically elected.

This sketch is of course simplified, but it shows that both sides tend to reduce *intent* to *decision*, in order either to establish or to undermine the authority of the Constitution. But why should the Constitution have authority over us? What is largely missing in today's debate on the Constitution is the

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claim—found in different forms throughout these volumes—that the Constitution, as Noah Webster put it, would inaugurate a new era, an *empire of reason*. It is not enough simply to assert that a democratic decision should prevail: why democracy? And specifically, which kind of democracy? The latter especially was the subject of the original debate on the Constitution and deserves to be reconsidered today. For we cannot know in which light to consider the authority of the Constitution—as constraint against innovation or inspiration for it—until we know what we require from a democracy. The first answer I shall give to why we should return to our beginnings is the need to question whether democracy, and in particular our democracy, has a basis in reason. The original debate makes a very ambitious claim for America's greatness that we still need to appreciate and assess.

To explore the matter we have to return to a beginning long before the Constitution in modern political philosophy. That beginning is none other than the "state of nature" described by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, a concept that has lost most of its force today but that still had currency among the Founders. It was their beginning.

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The state of nature was a pre-political condition, to which it was necessary to recur in order to find the basis of politics: politics must be based on what comes before politics. Why? To see the reason for this fateful conception, we need to compare it to the thought it opposed and replaced, which is conveniently found in Aristotle. For Aristotle, there is no beginning behind or before politics that provides a guide or basis for politics; every beginning of politics is political. That is one thing intended by his statement that man is by nature a political animal. Every kind of politics, every regime, is guided by the principle which rules it from the beginning: a beginning in accordance with a principle and a rule in accordance with the principle of the beginning. To justify this elaboration, I mention that the Greek word *arche* means rule, principle, and beginning. From Aristotle's standpoint, then, to understand America one would first look for its principle of rule in the speeches of its rulers, in the Constitution, and also in the Declaration of Independence.

To this political view of politics, which looks at politics in its own terms, there is indeed a nonpolitical background out of which every regime comes, to which it returns. This is the cycle of regimes, in which regimes rise and fall. Regimes arise because previous regimes have fallen. Why do they fall? In every case they fall for accidental causes but also, and especially, for one essential cause: they are all imperfect. They are imperfect because they are partial and partisan. Although they claim to advance the common good, in fact they represent the good of a party, typically the party of the few or of the many. All regimes are typically oligarchies or democracies. Aristotle mentions the possibility of a mixed regime that would have the advantages of both parties, and he urges it on the partisans; but he does not have much confidence that it will be adopted. Although every regime is debatable, the debate will be judged by the very partisans who carry it on; and they will surely judge in their own partisan interest.

No actual regime is likely to represent an impartial common good. And yet it is very important to judge regimes by the standard of the truth of their partisan claims. For their partialities will eventually catch up with them and bring them down. For example, a regime based on the self-evident half-truth that all men are created equal will eventually founder because of its disregard of the many ways in which men are created unequal. Even if such a regime seems powerful at the moment, it will be subject to revolution by the partisans, in this case those of the few,

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whom it ignores. Sooner or later they will gather their forces, pick on a convenient pretext, overthrow the regime and set up their own—only to make a compensating error, leaving their regime also open to future revolution or destruction. In the long run, therefore, human beings repeat the same mistakes and learn nothing from their political experience. They live in a cycle of regimes that turns from one regime to another without ever achieving gains that cannot be lost. Some regimes are surely better than others, but no regime is capable of establishing irreversible "progress," as we call it.

The great promise of modern political philosophy, reflected in the great hopefulness that inspired Americans on both sides of the debate on the Constitution, was that such irreversible progress could be made. All their realism was enlisted in the service of their idealism. Their historical studies and their political experience were directed by the belief that the truths they knew could be made effective and lasting in this—or another—Constitution. They agreed with the ancients that the truth matters in politics, so much so that they thought, contrary to the ancients, that they had found a true solution for the partisan ills that put a term to regimes. Their grounded hopes are echoed by shrill voices expressing the groundless hopes of our time.

If the constitutional debate were held today, the parties would exchange declarations of "values" or "preferences" as if it were enough to assert them regardless of truth. In matters of public policy we constantly claim that this or that scheme will "work," implying often unconsciously that it accords with the truth. But in larger, constitutional questions we seem to suppose that the whole system rests on a wish, above all the wish for democracy. Our pragmatism differs from that of the Founders, who of course did not use the word. Their pragmatism said that a constitution works if it's true; ours says that it's true if it works, or even, in recent liberal philosophy, that it doesn't matter whether it's true if it works.

The great confidence of the constitutional generation—Our Fathers, Lincoln called them—arose from the modern idea of constructing politics from the pre-political beginning I mentioned, the state of nature. The foremost advantage to be had from beginning in this way was to banish partisan opinion from constitution-making, for partisan opinion not only keeps us from discerning but also from applying truth in politics. Partisan opinion is confusing because it is diverse; partisan opinions differ over the nature of happiness, over the *ends* of action. By following Hobbes and turning to the passions that allegedly precede opinions, above all to the passion of *fear*, we can discover a universal, non-partisan foundation for politics. We may not know what happiness is, but each of us can know or imagine the fear of death we would feel without a government to keep the peace. The shift from "we" to "each" (since each fears dependably for his own death) expresses the individualism of modern politics and also gives rise to its emphasis on liberty together—uneasily—with peace.

With a very powerful (though imaginary) fear, a new situation (the state of nature) is created in which we will be too frightened to insist on our political opinions and will therefore be able to begin anew unencumbered by them. That non-partisan beginning provides the ground for a new non-partisan constitution, promising the "new era" in politics that Noah Webster announced. Aristotle thought that politics is essentially partisan, but Hobbes and Locke believed that they had found a way to tame partisanship by restraining its excesses and harnessing its energies. Their entire programs—for indeed they differed strikingly—included a new education (in science and religion) and a new economics. The political part was the construction of a model constitution (now I speak of Locke and Montesquieu) from existing material, the English constitution, so as to prove this was a workable scheme and not a utopia. The English constitution was reinterpreted as an impartial republic, a republic in fact but not in name, a republic

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without republican animus, not resting on republican opinion. If England, where republican opinion was scarce and held repugnant, could nonetheless have a republican constitution in effect, then the possibility of distinguishing politics from political opinion would seem to be validated.

What is the general character of the modern impartial regime? For Aristotle, the typical partisan conflict is between the many and the few, the people and the nobles. To replace that conflict, the general formula for the modern impartial regime is to remove one of the two parties, the people, as a political actor. Then let the elite compete before the people for its favor. When the people elects the government, it becomes the judge of government. It does not form a government itself; the people does not rule. In our understanding, the people is no longer a party, no longer the demos that is just one part, if the majority, of a city. With us, everyone belongs to "the people," even those who supposedly serve it. Instead of setting the few against the many, the impartial republic puts the few among the many, doing them benefits while advancing their own ambition. In government, the few formally *represent* the many and are prevented from *ruling* the many by a constitution of checks and balances. That constitution will have variations, and will always need to be ratified if not constituted by the people; but in its general formula, in principle, it is permanent. Its discovery is not only a boon to mankind, since it benefits—and to the necessary degree reconciles—the two political parties. It is also irreversible because the benefits are visible to all and do not depend on doubtful rhetoric, much less on a particular culture, for support.

Such is the ambition of modern political science, which inspired the debate on the Constitution. This was the beginning behind the beginning of the Constitution. The choice between the Constitution of the Federalists and whatever alternative the Anti-Federalists might have agreed on—perhaps the existing Articles of Confederation somewhat modified—does not simply repeat the old debate between the few and the many, or any such partisan conflict in the Aristotelian mode. It is a debate on the character of the impartial republic, of the single regime, however varied in detail, which is to change the nature of politics from then on. Americans wished to constitute a regime that would take from the English constitution the honor of serving as a model for mankind. The debate carried on in these volumes, though laden with references to American interests, was not solely or mainly concerned with what was good for America. Nor, on the other hand, was it a debate solely among philosophers with no practical intent. The debate had all humanity in mind and each particular people, beginning with the American people, in view. The monumental ambition expressed in that debate is the second reason for returning to it.

Nowadays we hear little of the state of nature that was supposed to secure the impartial modern republic. Fearful self-interest has lost its political role of taming partisan stubbornness; it has been reduced to economic incentive, and in the process fear has been replaced by avarice. The seventeenth-century state of nature has been replaced by "culture," as we have called it since the nineteenth century, a new realm of opinion understood as having *no* relation to nature. Pure nature, distinct from opinion, has yielded to pure culture, which is nothing but opinion. So today many academics think that the American beginning has no relation to the truth about human nature but merely expresses parochial American values. From this faulty premise the inference is drawn

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that every constitution "works" because it suits the values that determined its conception and acceptance. How could it not work? If we were free to posit values regardless of truth and nature, every regime should be self-validating for those who posit; and those who refuse are equally justified. There would be no debate because there would be no possibility of argument. But the recent collapse of Communism, said to have happened because Communism "didn't work," suggests that truth matters after all. That wondrous event was a great victory for America not least because it sustained the premise of our Constitution that nature is more powerful than culture.

Nonetheless, culture is in a way more important than nature in the Constitution. For although the Constitution is based on the state of nature, it is not a natural constitution in the sense of being determined by nature. It had to be constituted, and the choice of how to do so between Federalists and Anti-Federalists was a real one: the outcome was not a foregone conclusion. Then again, after the Constitution was constituted, it produced a way of thinking—a culture—favorable to itself. This disposition of mind was what the Federalists wanted and the Anti-Federalists were afraid of. The Federalists hoped that the American people, having made a reasonable choice in favor of the Constitution, would come in time to *venerate* it, no longer treating it as a choice they could take back.

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A constitutional culture of this kind is the very opposite of the culture discussed above. It is the culture of which the Constitution is the cause, not the effect. It is deliberately produced even if unexamined and accepted through habit by later generations. Instead of replacing or opposing nature, this culture cooperates with nature, with the self-interest in ambition and security natural to human beings. It takes advantage of natural impulses and inclinations instead of denying them. It thereby admits a standard in nature by which to compare and judge regimes. The debate on the Constitution was over the form and direction of American politics thereafter; it was over the nature of the *founding*. A founding is a political beginning or principle that comprises the natural basis of the regime and allows it to be humanly chosen. We can live a life that is reasonable because it is based on nature and yet our own because it has its own culture that is not determined by nature.

To understand the enduring character of American politics is the third reason for returning to the beginning. Anyone who wishes to know about American politics has much to learn from contemporary events; but there is no substitute for careful reflection on the founding. Everything begins from the founding, and the subsequent changes have occurred to America as founded. Even the attributes of our politics said to have changed since 1787—democratization, heterogeneity, complexity, centralization, bureaucracy—were either set in motion then or took their particular character from the founding. Even when ineluctable necessities such as bureaucracy are imposed on us, we submit to them in our own way, creating an *American* bureaucracy. Here I have been speaking in Aristotelian terms because the American regime is not simply a theoretical, impartial republic modeled on mankind's necessities. It has its own character and has made its own culture.

Abraham Lincoln described the relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in biblical language (Proverbs 25:11) as the apple of gold in the frame of silver. The apple is the natural principle of human equality; the frame surrounding it is the conventional or cultural structure that displays the principle, gives it

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life, and makes it ours. The two together are a whole, necessary to each other. But they are also separate parts: one that in 1776 declared the principle, another that in 1787 made it work politically. Their separateness makes a point of the act of constituting, done with calm and, despite the heated words, with a certain noble elevation in both the deliberation of the Constitutional Convention and the debate over ratification afterward.

We can be glad that the Federalists won the debate. As I said above, by the standards of contemporary political debate the argumentation was unattainably higher on both sides. But the Federalists were clearly superior. The essential question between

The debate on the Constitution was over the form and direction of American politics thereafter; it was over the nature of the founding.

Federalists and Anti-Federalists was over the source of great danger to republics: does it come from the many or the few? The Anti-Federalists consistently (if variously) maintained the traditional republican opinion that the few are the main enemy of republics. But the Federalists disagreed with this bromide. They offered the paradoxical judgment that the many are their own worst enemy, that the bane of popular government, in the statement of Federalist 10, is "majority faction"—a phrase that sounds like a contradiction in terms to traditional republicans. To be sure, the ambitious few are also dangerous, but mainly because they can get the backing of an aroused majority. For their innovative view the Federalists were accused by their opponents during the constitutional debates, by Thomas Jefferson in the 1790s, and by later historians of lacking faith in the people, of being unrepublican. But they were intelligent republicans looking for ways to make republics more viable, and so raise them in the esteem of respectable opinion in the civilized world.

The Federalists accepted the risk of appearing to be doubtful republicans; they were a party concerned to reduce the partisanship of republics. In their Constitution they created an *introspective republicanism* not preoccupied with denouncing the enemies of republics but alive to the dangers from within the principle. In their view the worst faction in a republic was the one that looked like a republican majority, and they fashioned a republic that could defend itself against the republican danger, using "republican remedies." Merely to mention the makers of the French Revolution evokes the contrast between American introspection—I will even say sophistication—and men who had no proper notion that republics too could be tyrannies. That thought combines the three reasons for returning to our beginnings, and it is still valid now.

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Poems
by Frederick Morgan & Harvey Shapiro

The fugitive

τὴν ἐναντίαν δὲ δραμοῦσα ἥξει
οὐκ εἰς ἄλλο, ἀλλ᾽ εἰς αὐτὴν

When I awoke at last from the desperate dream
a morning mist was drifting off the islands.
I looked down on an empty beach—
saw rocks, saw birds, saw clumps of weed
and the mild waves rolling in.
The song—could I still be hearing it?—still pierced me.

What else did I remember? Shapes of terror,
deep anguish, crazed pursuit.
I groaned, and strove to fight free of it all,
all but that song—voiceless, indeterminate—
which through the dream's long sway had been transcending it
and now, it seemed, survived.
It came, I thought, from a place between sleep and waking.

I rose up then from the grass where I'd been lying
and stretched, and walked about,
and found close by, where the sparse soil edged the rocks,
the ancient image of a threshold god.
He was faceless now and seemingly abandoned—
but I prayed to him nonetheless.

"God of these shores, experienced, enduring—
assayer of all wayward, transient things—

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modest master of the moment's chances—
strengthen me, please, for onward voyaging."
As I spoke the words a huge sleep overcame me,
and I dropped to the ground where I stood, and closed my eyes.

✳

Hours later I emerged again from sleep
that seemed unsoiled, untroubled.
I stirred, turned on my side, felt a light breeze,
and opened fresher eyes to the brilliant day.
The sun rode high now and the song had ceased.
From near at hand, through the soft noonday hush,
I heard the gentle scuffling of the waves.

The wonder of the thing came over me:
what was this scene in which I found myself?
I got to my feet again and stared out seaward,
and saw far off beyond the watery dazzle
outlines of other islands, vague and still.
They seemed familiar, yet I could not place them.

I laughed to myself: I was lost.
And yet, being lost, I knew I had somehow arrived
at the place predestined and the time foretold.
The god stood by me still and I bowed to him,
and as I did, all at once the song was resumed—
not voiceless now, but fleshed in human tones.

The breeze blew fresh, and memories returned
of the man I had been in the days before the dream,
and tears poured down my cheeks as the song came closer.
I wept, and knew myself—and then I saw her,
white-robed and tall, walking the beach alone—
alone as every spirit is alone—
head thrown back, "trilling like a swan by Xanthos,"
that girl with splendid tawny hair . . .

—Frederick Morgan

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Gifts

The gift he once ventured
in weak generosity
was offered too soon
yet too late to be withdrawn.

The woman, serene
in her unhindered progress,
had been blessed long before
though not by this man.

Prime and unsharable
that earliest gift,
that lasting exemption
from day-to-day anguish—

as though she were an Eve
to whom the Lord had spoken:
"Go free—I love thy waywardness.
The pain shall be his."

—*Frederick Morgan*

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The watcher

I stand here at the crossroads
near the gray strip of beach
among these windblown pines.

Thoughts move through my mind
like clouds through a calm sky—
slower than life, unhurried.

I grant rest to the traveler:
he throws himself down at my feet
and dreams his way through sorrow.

In grimmest dog-day heat
my ancient fount still brims
with cold unsullied water,

while night by moonless night
these two eyes chill as stars
gleam out from the worn mask.

Question not what I am.
Solitary in this place
I lead strange lives elsewhere

and thus am reckoned god:
"god of the rocks and pines"
is how you might conceive it . . .

Worship me then, if you choose,
as one who knows and waits.
The rest will follow after.

—*Frederick Morgan*

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On writing

1.
When the young hood snarls at him,
Sam Spade says, "The cheaper the crook,
the gaudier the patter."
Does this apply to poets?

2.
Organize your verse
around a woman—
see Yeats and Dante—
then throw in
the world and death.

3.
We file into the chapel
and his verses are read to us in greeting.
Before we file out, his body is wheeled by.
The words of a dead maker prepare to go on trial
through the long seasons of rain and snow.

4.
You, lady, leaning down
from the gold bar of heaven,
shine for me over Seventh Avenue,
get me across streets safely,
follow me into dark subways,
remind me of my buried life.

—*Harvey Shapiro*

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Art

Mostly Marden

by Jed Perl

Academic art is all preconception, all design. It is an art that does not involve risk, an art that knows exactly where it means to end up. If an academic artist is immensely gifted or skillful, the result can be rather astonishing, a trick perfectly performed. The examples are legion: Roman busts of Antinous, Vasari's paintings and murals, much Italian religious painting of the seventeenth century, Valenciennes' big Neoclassical landscapes, Winterhalter's portraits, the Op Art of Agam. There's an impersonality to all this work, and although it can occasionally be confused with the immolation of personality that we know from great art, it is of course a totally different thing. The academic artist is impersonal because the successful completion of a plan necessitates a suppression of personality. Academic art is eerily anonymous. This helps to explain its frequently strong period flavor.

The work that Brice Marden has been doing in the past decade has that eerie anonymity, and people are (not surprisingly) confusing it with the achieved impersonality of great art. Marden is a very skillful artist. His show at the Matthew Marks Gallery in May and June was so immaculately refined, one could regard it either as a succession of masterworks or as nothing. Nothing short of a masterpiece has any business being this seamlessly coherent. And how does one tell the difference? I would put it this way. The seamlessness of masterpieces is something that a viewer slips deep, deep into; one is looking at the painting and then, suddenly, one is all the way inside the painting. Marden's paintings are seamless only in the sense that they leave a viewer shut out. They're counterfeit masterpieces. I went through the Marden show (which filled the two floors that the Matthew Marks Gallery occupies in one Madison Avenue building) and at every turn I admired the artist's perfect taste, his elegant way of handling paint and canvas and pen and ink. What really good artist has such damn good taste?

There were four new paintings in the Matthew Marks show, all in the second-floor gallery. There are only a few colors in each of these paintings, and they are the weather-worn olive greens and blue-grays and blacker grays that Marden has been using for years. These are beautiful colors, and Marden combines them in fetching—all-too-fetching—color schemes. He likes these colors for their own sake, and who can blame him? They would be the perfect colors to paint a room, but they're much too suavely coordinated to do anything in a painting. Marden's compositions don't do anything much, either. Like the colors, the compositions are striking without being especially engaging. Each painting is filled with a loose net of strokes and counter-strokes, a net of lines that run up and down and back and forth and unify the surface with a sort of gently rocking, slightly angular movement. Marden paints these lines with a couple of colors, and they overlap so

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that there's a sense of a shallow yet fluid space. It's a space that has some breathing room, and this is one of the things that marks Marden as an accomplished academic artist: the lesser ones can't manage breathing room. The paintings are big but not too big; three paintings are 96 by 102 inches, and the other one is 100 by 70 inches.

Filling the rest of the second-floor gallery were drawings, mostly in black ink and bluish gouache. On the fifth floor there were more drawings, as well as several groups of etchings. All the work was from 1991 to 1993, and the mix of media seems to have been carefully planned. Looking at this work, we're meant to see Marden's full range, and we're also meant to see how the networks of lines in his paintings evolved from the work he's done in the drawings. In many of the drawings the starting point appears to be a figure. There are several drawings that are immediately recognizable as figures (one is called *Figure*), and both the long series of drawings called *The Virgins* (which lead up to a painting called *Virgins*) and the series of etchings called *After Botticelli* consist of abstract variations on a theme of interlinked figures. (The *After Botticelli* etchings are based on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*.) In these drawings and prints we are meant to see the origin of the interlinked lines in the paintings, and we may even begin to feel that some of the triangular forms in the paintings are somehow related to the triangular shapes of heads in the drawings. Marden probably wants us to see how the swinging, angling lines in the paintings relate to an idea of bodily movement. He's showing us, rather programmatically, a thought-process that goes into the paintings. He's showing us how he goes about deriving an abstract painting from figurative impulses, and the step-by-step clarity of the demonstration is not unlike the way a nineteenth-century academician would instruct students in how to derive a history painting from life studies. The Matthew Marks show had a pedagogical quality, which some people no doubt find charming. But I wonder why it is that the paintings that are derived from a study of Renaissance figure composition look so much like the paintings that Marden was, a few years ago, deriving from a study of Oriental calligraphy.

This was not a particularly big show, and it cannot be insignificant that Marden, who has more or less his pick of New York City spaces, would choose to show in the relatively small-scaled (albeit handsome) Matthew Marks space. Marks has been exhibiting Marden's drawings and prints for a few years now, and Marks has been closely associated with a number of Marden projects. But I imagine that Marden has other reasons for exhibiting on the Upper East Side. The Metropolitan Museum is a few blocks away, and the building where the Matthew Marks Gallery is quartered is also the current home of the Saidenberg Gallery, one of the very few remaining establishments whose proprietors have some first-hand connection with the world of Picasso. Marden's work, with its weathered colors and quivering lines, gains authority in this burnished atmosphere, and part of that authority has to do with the feeling of old money that still pervades Madison in the Seventies. A show at Matthew Marks is just a suaver version of the unprepossessingly elegant kind of presentation one finds at Saidenberg, where they hang a few paintings and drawings by modern masters and let things take their course. For an artist of Marden's stature this was an almost casual show, and it may be Marden's way of suggesting that he's too fine an artist to any longer be caught up in the downtown (or even the Fifty-seventh Street) posing.

Some of what has been written about Marden in recent years gives the same impression. A very odd text was produced by Brenda Richardson to accompany the catalogue of the show of paintings called *Cold Mountain*, which opened at the Dia Foundation in the winter of 1991-92 and finished an international tour in Bonn this past June. Of course Richardson's text cannot necessarily be said to reflect Marden's desires, but in the catalogue foreword it is pointed out that Richardson (who's a curator at the Bal-

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timore Museum of Art) "has been witness [to the *Cold Mountain* series] since its inception," and projects like this book are not done without the artist's close cooperation. What is odd about the essay is that the first two of its six parts don't even deal with Marden—they're devoted to a discussion of ancient Chinese painting and calligraphy. The third part is mostly about Pollock. Richardson quotes extensively from a talk that Marden gave about Pollock, whose work of the Fifties, which has generally been considered inferior to his work of the late Forties, Marden apparently finds especially interesting. Then, in the last two sections of the long essay, Richardson moves to Marden's *Cold Mountain* paintings, which are presented as his original synthesis of Chinese painting and Pollock. Marden is so much in the background in the first half of the essay that it could be interpreted as a sort of insult to Marden, except that I suppose Marden calculates that this extreme generosity about sources and inspirations will underline his own importance. In the Seventies Marden did a series of collages, using postcard reproductions of great works of art. The series was called *Homage to Art*, and it was Marden's immaculately tasteful version of Pop appropriation. With the passage of time, Marden's art-historical sense has become only more immaculate. Now he plays the role of the selfless classicist as it's outlined in T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." And Madison in the Seventies provides just the setting for this performance.

Is it always the case that academic art comes to the fore in periods of artistic uncertainty and crisis? Certainly this is true now. It is common to observe that Marden is one of the few contemporary artists whose work appeals to critics of widely varying outlooks. This could mean that he transcends categories. Or it could mean that he's all things to all people. I think Brice Marden has looked into a troubled art world and calculated exactly what it is that people want to see. For many artists the now standard descriptions of contemporary art in terms of radical and conservative tendencies seem fairly absurd. Artists take it for granted that they must be both renegades and traditionalists, both totally uninhibited and totally disciplined. How these apparently conflicting impulses are reconciled is something that an artist works out in the studio, whether it is as a student working with a teacher or as a mature artist working toward the next show. The sad fact, however, is that this process, which ought to be a given, has become, in large measure through the sloganeering of critics and commentators, more of a mystery both inside and outside the art world than it ever was before. Marden's recent paintings appeal to a wide public, both of artists and gallerygoers, because they appear to transcend the debates. Marden's work reconciles apparently radical and traditional impulses without shaking anything up. (He's a curator's dream: an artist who's a consensus builder.) Marden's paintings are slick advertisements for good painting. They express nothing, but they do state opinions: they're pro-tradition, pro-expression, pro-beauty.

There is a detail that can be observed in a number of Marden's paintings that goes to the heart of what is wrong with them. Sometimes, apparently, Marden decides that a line that he's painting ought to look like it's passing beneath a line that he's already painted. So he carefully stops at the edge of the line that's already there, begins again on its other side, and then neatly paints right to the edges of the older line so that it appears that the line that was there first is actually overlapping the newer line. From close up the effect is creepily calculated. It's faked improvisation. But from five or six feet away the effect is believable—it will pass. And people seem to be willing to keep that safe distance from Marden's paintings. The success of the work depends as much on Marden's calculations about the audience as it does on his calculated effects. Marden's paintings are what many people expect good paintings to look like half a century after Pollock. But the real thing is never this easy on the eyes.

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William Plevin-Foust's show at the Bowery Gallery in May was open-ended and fluid, and those are virtues that I've never before associated with this painter's work. There were five different kinds of work in the show: self-portrait heads painted in black and white; landscapes with areas of deep color and heavy black lines; abstracted landscapes with a Futurist look; a large figure composition, *The Red King's Dream*, also done in heavy color and black lines; and some delicate, casual drawings of the figure. Everything that Plevin-Foust does is grounded in a desire to give traditional forms—landscape, portrait, figure composition—some of the simplicity and all-in-one power of abstract art. There's an extremist element in Plevin-Foust's work: he paints landscapes in a few, carefully picked greens and grays and blues; he does self-portraits in black and white. He goes for an austere effect, and he believes that there's a sort of lushness to austerity. Maybe he feels that it's luxurious to let so little stand for so much.

The only really weak works were the Futurist landscapes. Plevin-Foust doesn't know how to construct an abstract space, and when he turns a landscape into an arrangement of swirling forces and counterforces the effect is trashily, aimlessly baroque. But in the larger context of this show these failed abstractions had a point. Plevin-Foust was working some flights of fancy out of his system, with the result that the rest of the work was beautifully controlled. Plevin-Foust has a taste for hyperbole. He will give a tree the shape of a flame, but in the new paintings the metaphor is pleasingly concise. The big painting, a fairy tale about a king and his *commedia dell'arte* courtiers, has its share of sentimental gestures, but they don't give a lachrymose effect as was the case in Plevin-Foust's earlier paintings of jugglers and clowns. And the portrait busts are spectacularly accomplished pieces of painting: the artist's long solemn face has a gravity and clarity that I associate with the figures on Gothic cathedrals. The drawings, though in a familiar Giacomettiesque mode, are remarkably searching and delicate.

Plevin-Foust is playing with themes that are (for him) familiar, but his work has a new freedom and expansiveness, and one quite naturally looks for an explanation. It has always been immediately evident that Plevin-Foust's work is strongly influenced by the painting of Leland Bell, who died in 1991. I think that the growth in Plevin-Foust's work may have to do with his now changed relation to a beloved teacher. Plevin-Foust derives his heavy black outlines and flat planes of color from Bell (just as Bell may well have derived them from his teacher, Karl Knaths), and although Plevin-Foust was always a very accomplished artist, so long as Bell was working it was hard to know why one ought to be looking at a Plevin-Foust instead of a Leland Bell. Bell's death changes Plevin-Foust's situation, and this is important because it has a bearing on how tradition is being passed on right now. For the viewer, the fact that Bell is no longer painting makes us look differently at the paintings of artists who work out of his work: they are no longer seconding Bell's approach so much as they are carrying it forward. The tradition is in their hands now, and that's exciting. Plevin-Foust's recent exhibition felt less safe, less steady on its feet than his earlier shows. There's an urgency in Plevin-Foust's work that I've never seen before, and in the big figure composition he has brought off his first really all-together large-size painting. This show was about doing a lot of things and doing them *now*. Plevin-Foust is, for the first time in his life, painting as if the future depended on it.

The Gagosian Gallery's new space at 136 Wooster Street is a winning addition to the SoHo scene. (It's actually a couple of years old, but its significance has only come into focus this season.) Big, boxy, and garage-like, it has a giant pull-up front door that makes it possible to install gigantic sculptures, sculptures that reach all the way to the ceiling. Both Richard Serra and Mark di Suvero have now used 136 Wooster to rethink the way that sculpture fits into an inte-

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rior space. This is a big space that can be completely filled with form. The idea is, of course, not entirely new. Many years ago Ronald Bladen did something similar at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. And the Castelli space on Greene Street (which closed a couple of years ago after an accident with a Serra sculpture) inspired some installations by Serra as well as by Don Judd that had a related space-filling capacity. But the high, very wide, and very deep Gagosian space has a feeling all its own. It's better proportioned than Castelli's Greene Street gallery, which had the overly deep shape that is characteristic of SoHo lofts. And, because 136 Wooster is a one-story building, it can support amounts of weight that were a problem on Greene Street.

Di Suvero's idea was to fill 136 Wooster with a single work, called *Aurora*. It was constructed *in situ*, out of steel beams, and was up from April 24 to June 11. The composition, made of angles and semicircles, is compactly symmetrical. Too symmetrical, perhaps. While di Suvero has not lost his knack for moving our eye through space at surprising, dramatic angles, it's an overly inward-turning piece. Di Suvero's work here —like much of his recent sculpture—lacks the brash improvisatory force and surprising off-balance balances of his work of the Sixties; its restrained geometric character is closest to work of the early Seventies, such as *For Roebling*.

Aurora is very much a work in a well-studied genre; it breaks no new ground. Yet seen on Wooster Street *Aurora* was an arresting presence. There was something surreal about the way this stolid steel composition took up residence in the space. The effect was reminiscent of the Magritte painting of an apple that fills a room. In his Wooster Street space, the dealer Larry Gagosian, with his king-sized private-sector ambitions, has turned the idea of public sculpture on its head. He's come up with a commercial gallery that's big enough and sturdy enough to hold public sculpture. In a sense, he's reinvented public sculpture as a private experience.

Exhibition notes

"Fairfield Porter: An American Painter"
at the Parrish Art Museum,
Southampton, New York.
June 27–September 12, 1993

The exhibition that William C. Agee has devoted to the work of Fairfield Porter (1907–1975) is an event of considerable importance. Although, like many American painters of his generation, Porter did not hit his stride as an artist until he was in his forties, he soon developed into one of the best painters of his period. It wasn't until the last years of his life, however, that the public began to catch up with his achievement, and it is still too little known. While in the 1950s and Sixties he enjoyed the esteem of a small circle of painters and poets—among them, Willem de Kooning, Frank O'Hara, and John Ashbery—and indeed exerted some influence on a younger generation of representational painters, Porter had more of a following as a critic for *Art News* and *The Nation* and as the author of a monograph on Thomas Eakins (1959) than he did as an artist. It was only in the Seventies that his work began to enter the museums, and not until 1983, eight years after his death, was there a major museum survey of his *oeuvre*. That was the exhibition organized by Kenworth Moffett at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston under the title "Fairfield Porter: Realist Painter in an Age of Abstraction."

The very title of that 1983 retrospective was an acknowledgment of the problem that had impeded the flowering of Porter's public reputation. For he belonged to the generation and to the artistic milieu of the Abstract Expressionist painters who dominated the art scene in which Porter produced his first important pictures, yet Porter himself remained a representational painter of traditional subjects—landscapes, figures, interiors, and still lifes. Full recognition of his distinctive artistic qualities had therefore to wait until the Abstract Expressionist movement had passed into history. Only then, as it turned out, was it possible to see the

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strengths of other aesthetic currents—especially in the realm of representational art—that had emerged at the same time, and indeed, in Porter's case, in response to the imperatives of that movement.

What, beginning in the 1950s, Porter created out of his response to his immediate contemporaries, was a personal style that combined painterly fluency and a rigorous command of pictorial form with a domestic subject-matter drawn directly from his own experience. This was more of a feat than it seemed to many observers at the time. As Mr. Agee writes in the catalogue accompanying the current exhibition, Porter's painting did not have the look of something "difficult or demanding." It took a while to understand that, for Porter, "the actual subject was of little concern; rather it was in the paint itself that he found the life, the vitality, and the wholeness of the painting. He understood that the difference between realism and abstraction is not as simple as it seems. . . . For Porter, the physical qualities of the medium come first, and it is the tension between realism and abstraction that reveals the essential character of his art."

The selection of pictures made by Mr. Agee—assisted by Malama Maron-Bersin, Michele White, and Peter Blank, three of his graduate students at Hunter College—is largely drawn from the donation of 237 works which the Porter estate made to the Parrish Art Museum in 1980. (Porter and his family lived in Southampton for many years.) To the Parrish pictures Mr. Agee and his colleagues have added important works from other public and private collections. There is one painting from the 1930s, four from the Forties, with the remaining sixty pictures dating from the Fifties down to 1975. The result is one of the strongest exhibitions of Porter's art that has so far been given to us. It includes many of his greatest paintings—among them, *Katie and Anne* (1955), *July Interior* (1964), *The Living Room* (1964), *Morning Landscape* (1965), *Island Farmhouse* (1969), and the two self-portraits from 1968. It is the kind of exhibition that in any period but ours would instantly establish Porter as an American classic. Yet with the current climate of the art world so hostile to distinctions of quality, it remains to be seen whether Porter—even now—will be given his due. It is significant, I think, that no New York City museum saw fit to bring this exhibition to the city where Porter made his reputation.

"Fairfield Porter: An American Painter" will, however, travel to the following museums in the year ahead: the Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts (October 29–December 24, 1993); the Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana (January 20–March 20, 1994); the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York (May 14–July 3, 1994); and the Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine (July 20–September 21, 1994).

—Hilton Kramer

"Jean Dubuffet, 1943–1963:
Paintings, Sculptures, Assemblages"
at the Hirshhorn Museum and
Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
June 17–September 12, 1993

Going against the fashionable trend toward Everything-He-Ever-Did exhibitions of individual artists, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is currently presenting a highly selective look at the career of Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985). The exhibition was organized by James T. Demetrion, the Hirshhorn's director, who tells us that he regards Dubuffet as one of a "triumvirate of [postwar] European giants." Under Mr. Demetrion's guiding hand, the Hirshhorn has also given major shows to the other members of that triumvirate, Francis Bacon and Alberto Giacometti.

I wouldn't go as far as Mr. Demetrion in my praise of Dubuffet. For me, Giacometti stands head and shoulders above him as well as Bacon. But there is no denying that this exhibition serves Dubuffet well. By stopping in the early 1960s, it introduces us to, but spares us too close acquaintance with, the

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uniform and uniformly shallow late work. This concluding phase of Dubuffet's career, with its all-over mosaic of highly stylized figurative imagery, is epitomized by his sculpture in Chase Manhattan Plaza in downtown New York, a commission that was supposed to have gone to Giacometti.

The focus of this show, then, is the aftermath of Dubuffet's discovery of "art brut," or "raw art," the "naïve" artwork of children and the insane. By looking to sources of inspiration outside the traditions of Western art, Dubuffet hoped to cut through the carapace of culture and civilization and arrive at a more "honest" and "true" mode of artistic expression. Nearly all the one hundred works here are figure studies, portraits, and landscapes, most of them brightly colored oil paintings or assemblages with thick, plaster-like surfaces and with lines scratched into them.

These days, to call an artist "transgressive" is to sound terribly clichéd, but one is hard pressed to find a more appropriate adjective to pin on Dubuffet. He is determinedly transgressive in his handling of materials and imagery. A large-scale collage composed entirely of crumpled then flattened pieces of tinfoil can still surprise. So can a sculpture constructed entirely of sea sponges. The fact that both succeed as works of art is even more surprising.

But it goes deeper than that. Underlying Dubuffet's willfully awkward drawing and painting style, especially in his images of people and animals, is a deliberate, even disciplined rejection of any kind of idealism in art. This impulse is most obvious in his portraits, which can't be said to conform to the traditions of the genre, but which don't fully inhabit the realm of caricature, either.

Like most of the great modernist painters and sculptors, Dubuffet differs from today's "transgressive" artists in that his tactics weren't undertaken solely for their own sake. What invariably surfaces in Dubuffet's churning aesthetic is a deep humanity. The gnarled figure of a vintner in *The Soul of Morvan*—a sculpture made out of twisted grape vines and roots—is an expression of aesthetic opportunity, to be sure. It shows Dubuffet working at the extreme end of the found-object aesthetic, "seeing" in the random configuration of natural objects a human figure and doing little more in the way of artistic manipulation than simple assembly. Yet beyond the purely aesthetic aspect of this work one senses an identification of the artist with his subject, a Millet-like admiration for the dignity and difficulty of work on the land. This emotion is present in virtually all of Dubuffet's work, even the most comic. And there are two or three collages of figures made of butterfly wings that are among the most beautiful images in all modern art. (These, along with such paintings as the Ernst-like *Metaphysical Landscape*, suggest a Surrealist influence, about which it would be interesting to learn more.)

There is a soup-to-nuts Dubuffet retrospective in preparation for 1995 in Paris. But it is hard to imagine what such a sprawling undertaking will tell us about the artist that this judiciously conceived and well-selected exhibition does not. What a pity it isn't traveling.

A catalogue of the show, with essays by Susan J. Cooke, Jean Planque, and Peter Schjeldahl, has been published by the Smithsonian Institution Press (167 pages, $60; $29.95 paper).

—Eric Gibson

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Theater

Summer fare

by Donald Lyons

The salad bar of summer theater in New York offered two classical adaptations in outdoor settings and one modernist play indoors but with brilliantly estival settings. The classics were queerly and imperfectly staged; the recent play got a perfect production. Such is the capricious justice of art.

En Garde Arts is a seven-year-old company given to "site-specific" plays, generally written ad hoc for presentation in such locales as nursing homes. This summer, however, En Garde producer Anne Hamburger for the first time put on a play that had been done elsewhere, notably at the A.R.T. in Cambridge, where too it was directed by Tina Landau. The play is called "*Orestes*, written by Charles L. Mee, Jr.," although it is in fact a cartoon version of Euripides' masterpiece *Orestes*. This little-known play, from Euripides' dark and bitter late years, is a fierce and systematic revisionary dismantling of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, which had sought, fifty years earlier, to make sense—cosmic sense and civic sense and psychic sense—out of the Apollo-ordained slaying of his own mother by Orestes.

In the Euripides play, a demented Orestes, along with his bloodthirsty sister, Electra, is about to be sentenced to death by stoning by the Argive populace meeting in democratic assembly, with Clytemnestra's father leading the prosecution. Helen and her husband, Menelaus, arrive in time to save the pair if they would, but Helen proves selfish and vain and Menelaus a time-serving coward. When the mob passes a death sentence, Orestes and Electra, spurred by pal Pylades, concoct a desperate scheme of revenge and escape: they'll kill Helen and threaten to slice the throat of Helen's little daughter unless given safe passage away. The final tableau sees the three conspirators on the roof of the palace (which they have torched), a sword at the girl's throat. Apollo intervenes from the machine to announce that Helen has been raptured into heaven, Orestes is to marry the little girl, and Electra is to marry Pylades. But, in the words of the late William Arrowsmith,

> what remains after Apollo leaves is not the taste of the happy ending but the image of total disaster: the burning palace, the dead girl, the screaming mob, and the degenerate heirs dying in the arson of their own hatred . . . not even a god could halt the momentum of these forces in their sweep toward inevitable disaster. The magician waves his wand, but the nightmare survives the magic.

The *Orestes* is an anti-*Oresteia*. Euripides, that is, has already done the job of deconstructing Aeschylus; the power of his savage and sarcastic nihilism need only be allowed to be heard—in, say, the magnificent Arrowsmith translation—in order to register. But Charles Mee, unwilling to subordinate his agenda to that of Euripides—or even, as he might with patience and cunning have done, to *find* something like his agenda

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in and through Euripides—has daubed his intentions, like garish Halloween makeup, on the mask of the poor old Greek.

Thus, the play opened in what appeared to be at once a veterans' hospital and an AIDS ward; Menelaus was Norman Schwarzkopf; the astrology-besotted Helen was Nancy Reagan; Clytemnestra's vaguely Trumpoid father drove up in a Cadillac; the chorus of hospital nurses sang Supremes-like numbers complete with hand gestures and did their nails during the trial scene; Pylades was gay, I think; serial killers popped up; Apollo was a bratty twelve-year-old in a reversed baseball cap; Orestes, well played by Jefferson Mays as a neurotic invalid, sang a few Velvet Underground tunes.

Now some of all this was pretty funny. But the upshot was a blur—with Mee and Euripides alternately in and out of focus—that left one with little beyond the sentiment that the modern author thought war and murder and suffering and rich people and big generals were bad things. Mee neither told Euripides' story nor substituted a coherent one of his own. He thought it enough just to dress up the Greek characters in the guise of yesterday's P.C. villains.

But *Orestes* was a memorable experience, nevertheless, because En Garde had located a truly spectacular site, the Penn Yards, an abandoned New York Central Railroad freight yard on the Hudson that stretches from Fifty-ninth Street to Seventy-second Street. Around the mid-Sixties is an enormous burnt-out pier, one end of which has collapsed. This pier has an iron-columned front topped with a triangular pediment. The effect is of a lopsided and ruined temple—some freak of time in the Peloponnesus. It was the perfect objective architectural correlative to Euripides' vision. One sat in a little semicircular rising bleacher and watched the Jersey sun go down behind this awesome wreck; much later, Orestes and Electra dragged their little victim (impersonated, quite acceptably, by a rag doll) up atop the pediment. It was easy here to dream, to mount in the mind's eye, a platonically ideal production of the *Orestes*.

The Penn Yards, incidentally, have been bought by the Trump Organization and are henceforward to be known as Riverside South. The pier is slated for demolition. Donald Trump graciously allowed the artists to play upon his property and even scheduled to show up, on stage, in one performance. No word whether he came.

Farther uptown and to the east, but similarly alfresco, the New York Shakespeare Festival—the *new* New York Shakespeare Festival under the aegis of George C. Wolfe, with classical assistance from Kevin Kline—inaugurated its post-Akalaitis regime with a *Measure for Measure* in Central Park. Actually, the production is not exactly new, as it happens. Its director, Michael Rudman, had devised it for the Royal National Theatre in London a while back. The bright idea then and now was to set the action "somewhere in the Caribbean immediately prior to World War II," that is, in the last days of colonialism.

A natty, white Kevin Kline in navy jacket, white vest and pants is the Duke, who ducks out of town only to return in disguise as a hip Latino liberation cleric in floppy straw hat, reading glasses, baggy trousers, and lightly comic accent. The Duke leaves behind a solemn and bureaucratic Angelo, played by black Andre Braugher in a weighty red judge's robe. Angelo, of course, finds his icy enforcement of the morality laws sapped by a growing yen for the sister (Lisa Gay Hamilton, also black) of a man he has condemned to death for sexual license. She kneels to him for mercy; when she leaves he kneels out of guilt at his own lust. At their second interview, Angelo unveils his lust; Rudman has him bend Isabella over his desk. When she haughtily rejects him ("More than our brother is our chastity") and threatens publicity ("I will proclaim thee, Angelo"), he snarls, "Who will believe thee, Isabel?/ My unsoiled name, the austereness of my life . . ." At this point, the production seems to be nudging the audience into spotting Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill analogies.

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The only thing you couldn't spot in this Caribbean shuffle was Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. The Duke was reduced to a cross between David Niven and Carlos Fuentes; the Angelo, for all Braugher's intelligence and force, became a rigid robot; the Isabella was played in a weakly naturalistic and whining key throughout. With the principals thus caricatured, no engagement with this great play's knotted issues was possible. And worse was at hand. The play's abundant underworld life should be a richly shaded tapestry limning the repellently corrupt as well as the irresistibly life-affirming (Lucio). But here all we saw were strutting and swiveling celebrators of an eternal calypso. The Rudman demographics gave us a godlike white governor dispensing an olympian justice, a black magistrate unable to rise above his sexual appetites, and a black populace consisting of happy hookers and flashy pimps. The whole conceit may have looked clever and amusing back at the Royal National Theatre, but in Central Park it seemed somehow . . . how shall we say? . . . racist.

Set on the coast of southern California in the early 1950s, Jane Bowles's only full-length play, *In the Summer House*, opened on Broadway in 1953 with Judith Anderson and Mildred Dunnock. It has been revived at the Vivian Beaumont under the direction of JoAnne Akalaitis, late of the New York Shakespeare Festival. Jane Bowles is the object of a cult both as a "stylist" (betraying word) in her slender *oeuvre* and as a kamikaze bohemian in her private life. Ned Rorem, cited in the Beaumont program, quotes her as boasting, "I'm Jewish, homosexual, alcoholic, a communist—and I'm a cripple!"

The play deals, up to a point, with the conflicts between two monster mothers—the arbitrary and domineering Gertrude Eastman Cuevas and the distracted and alcoholic Mrs. Constable—and two wounded, warped daughters, Molly and Vivian. The stage belongs to the vivid mothers; the daughters are, respectively, insipid and obnoxious. A rivulet of plot runs through: it seems Molly pushes Vivian off a cliff (not a minute too soon) and Molly's mother later holds this over the girl's head to force her away from her husband and back into maternal subservience. But peeping out from under this all-too-predictable Fifties psychodrama is an imp of Surrealism. It seems there was an Apollinaire as well as a Carson McCullers in Bowles. (It is better to affiliate this streak in Bowles with the Surrealists than to put her in that long-abandoned dumpster called the Theater of the Absurd.)

Most interestingly, the language of the play metastasizes psychic disorder into talk of food: the peculiarities of Mexican eating habits ("they eat their beef well done, with sauce"); someone dreams of opening an "odd restaurant" to be called Restaurant Midnight or Restaurant Minuit; "chop suey—is it Chinese or American?" wonders Mrs. Constable; "I have never in my life shown my feelings, have a drink, have a hot dog," recommends one neurotic to another; when somebody says, "I don't respect anyone," the answer comes, "Who doesn't respect coffee?" The whole second half of the play takes place at the Lobster Bowl restaurant, presided over by Inez (the excellent Sheila Tousey), who "sets up oyster cocktails faster than anyone on the coast." Inez philosophizes, "Three hundred oyster cocktails, that means toothpicks and hot sauce. . . . I don't like oysters anymore. I supppose I saw too much of them, like anything else in life." A mother's sweet tooth for power is expressed by her dream of a box full of "little macaroons, some of them are orange and some of them are bright pink." And the wacky, oblique irrelevancies are not limited to food: Mrs. Constable has a couple of riotous drunk scenes, once ending up sprawled at the foot of a tree.

This running deflection of anxiety into absurdity is enough to keep the whole evening afloat, despite the sinking verbosities of the intruding psychodrama. Bowles's talent was comic, but I doubt that she ever saw that clearly.

The script has gotten a dream production.

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JoAnne Akalaitis was born to direct this play: in its compulsive shoehorning of emotion, of humanity, into angular and eccentric molds, it matches her coldly formalist but quirkily energetic sensibility exactly. There is, for example, a set of Mexicans who fandango in and out of the action. Akalaitis groups them, as they strum and stomp and sing, into her signature tight choral formations, and for once the gestural formula seems right, turning the Mexicans from clichés into threats. The sets of George Tsypin and the lighting of Jennifer Tipton —baking sands and cool blue waves— achieve a hallucinatory hyper-realism that is just what is needed to entrance our eyes and minds away from the psychology of the characters. Has either ever done better work? The deliberately deforming Fifties fashions of Ann Hould-Ward and the monotonously alienating chords of Philip Glass contribute to the desired effect. Dianne Wiest has to carry the heavy dramaturgic baggage as grande-dame Gertrude, and she staggers a bit under the less successful, less comic Bowles rhetoric; Frances Conroy—so good in the Moscow Art Theater's *Ivanov* at Yale a few years ago—easily pockets the play as the wise-cracking, cynical drunk. The ironist, as always, pleases more than the egoist. The rest of the roles, especially the dreary and overwritten daughters, are played, under the Akalaitis baton, without humor or pitch.

Still, for all its longueurs, *In the Summer House* was a surprise. I'd braced myself for something treacly, on the order of the sickly self-pity of Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding* or the phony poetics of bad Williams à la *Camino Real*, but in the event the fare was, if not precisely nourishing, at least spicier than expected.

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The media

The use & abuse of violence

by James Bowman

G. K. Chesterton once pointed out the intellectual legerdemain involved in the prohibitionist case against "alcohol." Nobody, Chesterton observed, drinks "alcohol," and nobody wants to. People drink beer and wine and whisky and brandy and frozen daquiris and piña coladas. "Alcohol" is merely some chemist's fancy, an attempt to render uniform drinkers' diverse behavior by identifying a common ingredient in what they drink. This is not a trivial point. We may not understand why someone chooses to drink, but it is a step away from understanding to deny that he has made a choice at all and instead to buy the chemist's story about how a mythical monster called "alcohol" has enslaved him.

The same thing is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of "violence." The word is torn from its natural context and made to stand on its own as a new bugbear to haunt the liberal imagination. Who commits "violence"—still less its evil twin "senseless violence"? The expression merely reinforces the implicit assumption of "violence" alone: namely that, like "alcohol," it is a ravening monster with a life of its own whose motivations are inscrutable. I think this monster is even more a chimera than "alcohol." People rob and assault and rape and kill each other not for the sake of the violence but for some other end. And sometimes, as in the case of self-defense, violent acts are justified. To categorize all such acts under the generic head of "violence" is simply to turn away from the attempt to understand why a particular violent act takes place.

And if, having thus turned away, one then proceeds to ratiocination about "violence" in the abstract, the result is guaranteed muddy thinking—on the order of the self-evidently false New Age platitude that "violence never solves anything." It solves lots of things, as anyone who descends from Olympus and gets close enough to it to see what it is for will tell you. What's your problem? Not enough money to buy drugs tonight? Mugging somebody will solve it. Or maybe you're the muggee rather than the mugger. Then your problem is to avoid being mugged. Superior force, successfully threatened or applied, will solve *your* problem—and give the mugger back his. Violence is a wonderful problem solver, perhaps the most efficacious of them all, which is one reason why it is both forbidden and fascinating.

Now it appears that people who like to indulge this fascination without doing violence to the taboos by watching dramatizations of it on television are going to be in trouble with the government. Senator Paul Simon, speaking to a conference organized in Beverly Hills on August 2 by the National Council for Families and Television, told some 650 representatives of the broadcasting business who were present that he was giving them sixty days to come up with a plan to regulate themselves with respect to the portrayal of violence—or else they

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would face some sort of government regulation. Already, after hearings he held on the subject back in May, Simon had induced the four major broadcast networks to agree to a warning label on programs he found to include too much, or too graphic, violence: "Due to some violent content, parental discretion advised." At least fifteen cable channels, including HBO, USA, MTV, and Nickelodeon, have subsequently agreed to adopt the warning.

By itself, the label would be no big deal. I was irresistibly reminded of the attempt a few years ago by Channel Four in Britain to identify sexually explicit programming with a little triangle—which people proceeded to take as the network's recommendation bestowed on the shows it reckoned were *really* hot. The real point of Simon's speech was public relations: to make it clear that he really *cared* about television's effects on America's children and that he was not going to be satisfied with the supine posture of the networks on the warning label. He has got to keep an eye out over his shoulder for other congressional carers seeking to go out in front on this one.

Politically, the attack upon "violence" is shooting fish in a barrel for both Left and Right. Not even willing to wait the sixty days, Representative John Bryant of Texas introduced on the day after Simon's warning a bill to entrust the regulation of violence on television to the FCC. Shortly thereafter, Representatives Edward Markey of Massachusetts and Jack Fields of Texas introduced another bill to require all televisions sold in the United States to include something called a V-chip, which Newton Minow is pushing. The idea is that it could be built into all new television sets and programmed to filter out any shows marked by their makers (or their censors) with a code identifying them as being too exciting for children. Senator Byron Dorgan has a bill pending to require the FCC to issue a "violence report card" every quarter. There is no constituency for violence except among the television producers who do nothing but bleat, as usual, about the First Amendment.

They should be less sheepish about violence and more sheepish about some of the other rubbish they purvey. As usual, when the political herd is galloping all in the same direction, they are sure to do some mindless damage to the fences. In his speech in Beverly Hills, for example, Senator Simon intimated that his response to TV "violence" was going to be to try not only to suppress images of it but also to dictate its presentation. Giving voice to the currently fashionable psycho-political orthodoxy about the causes of anti-social behavior in adolescents, Simon urged—in fact insisted—that the industry should go beyond censoring or labeling violent acts on TV to "deglamorize" such acts.

This is a much more frightening proposition. No one can be fool enough to suppose that if, for whatever reason, we are suddenly deprived of the opportunity to see a head exploding on television we will be an appreciably less free people. The reticences of decorum cost liberty little, and they should require little in the way of backing from the law so long as there are not madmen crying oppression at them. One might as well object that one is not allowed to see one's neighbors in their underwear. But if the government is telling the makers of television programs that violence either is or is not glamorous, that is oppression indeed. It amounts to the imposition upon artistic judgment of a political imperative which has nothing to do with it. The artists' purposes are not those of the social engineer and only tyranny would commandeer them to "educate the nation," as Senator Simon wants to do, into an official view of violence.

Moreover, this view is grievously mistaken. It is true that the most recent study of the subject, "Television and Violent Crime" by Brandon S. Centerwall in the Spring 1993 number of *The Public Interest*, seems to establish a direct correlation between the amounts of time spent watching television and levels of violent crime. It is also true that governments have a legitimate interest in preserving the social fabric even if doing so

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is at the expense of artistic freedom. But the only proper conclusion from Centerwall's study is that television ought to be banned altogether. I would have no objection to such a radical act, but too many of my more temperate countrymen would for it to be politically feasible. And lesser measures to do with the *presentation* of violence can have no foundation in social science at its present stage of advancement. Centerwall's instruments are not sensitive enough to register glamour.

My own impression from the so-called violence that I see on television is that it is neither plentiful nor glamorous. Look at the top-rated programs in any given week: Apart from movies, which are expurgated, nearly everything on the list actually produced by the poor beleaguered television industry itself is either news and documentary like "60 Minutes" and "PrimeTime Live" (even Senator Simon doesn't want to censor the news) or situation comedies like "Roseanne" and "Murphy Brown." In fact, over a period of several days as I was writing this column, I couldn't find anything violent to watch. "Murder She Wrote" looked promising, but turned out to be an old-fashioned mystery of the wholly decorous, Agatha Christie sort. The latest cop show, called "Sirens," had not a drop of blood in it. Instead it was a sensitive portrayal of a poor salesman thrown out of work by the Reagan-Bush recession who is talked out of killing himself by an attractive young policewoman. She convinces him that he can win back the love of his daughter by hugging her and telling her that he loves her. And while she is doing her good deed she learns something about improving her own marriage.

Such moralism about "relationships" is far, far more common on television these days than violence is—and probably far more harmful to people from the viewpoint of the social engineer. Think of all the bewildered children whose emotional lives are being wrecked by overdemonstrative, TV-crazed parents hugging away at them. Children who listen to the moronic theme song of Barney the purple dinosaur on (where else?) PBS—the song which goes: "I love you, you love me / We're a happy family / With a great big hug and a kiss from me to you / Won't you say you love me too?"—are sure to grow up into the sorts of people who write their own wedding ceremonies and demonstrate against the wearing of fur. How one longs for the days of "Gunsmoke" or "Wyatt Earp" or, one of my personal favorites, the World War II series called "Combat!" They may not have been much as art, but without being cute or priggish they put violence into a moral context. Most of them you can't even see in re-runs anymore. The best I can do with my cable company is "Bonanza"—which is really, I think, the one that started all this beastly hugging business in the first place. Little Joe, I could tell even then, was secretly a hugger, as he went on to show he was in "Little House on the Prairie."

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, though, it really was possible to "glamorize" violence—just as the *Chanson de Roland* or *Le Morte D'Arthur* glamorizes violence. Nowadays, *pace* Senator Simon, television is much more likely to trivialize than to glamorize it by making it seem the exclusive province of such social exotics as Amy Fisher or David Koresh. Does anyone consider them glamorous? Both have been the subject of more than one TV movie. Is Gian Luigi Ferri, the madman who murdered eight people in a law office in San Francisco in July, a glamorous figure because among his many delusions he treasured the hope of appearing on Oprah to tell his story? This is not to say that Oprah herself (like Phil and Sally Jessy and all the rest of them) is not glamorous, but her glamour derives not from violence but precisely from her ability seemingly to snuff with compassionate attention the inward violence (one of the range of sicknesses she treats) of such pathetic losers as Ferri, who are thus rendered even more marginal figures than they really are.

Violence and pathology, these days, go together like cannon and ball. And where is the glamour in being sick? Where (on television anyway) are the Davy Crocketts and the

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Matt Dillons, latter-day descendants of Roland and Lancelot, who made it seem to little boys a fine and noble thing to be proficient in killing one's enemies? Instead we have only nut cases and cops who are meant to be more "realistically" portrayed as being concerned rather with survival and personal happiness than any more honorable aim. The paradigm figures are Mel Gibson and Danny Glover in the *Lethal Weapon* series: the one a half-crazy daredevil in love with violence for its own sake, the other a nervous type just hoping to make it to retirement. The violence seems not glamorous but (as increasingly in the movies) self-consciously cinematic and unreal. It elicits the skills of the choreographer and cinematographer rather than the moralist.

Likewise, soldiers on television, as in "M*A*S*H" or "Major Dad," are almost exclusively comic figures and are seen, when they are seen at all, not in action but goofing off behind the lines. So far from the youth of America being endangered by the glamorization of violence, they are endangered by its absence. The craft of arms, by which our liberties are ultimately preserved, is a joke. There is nothing in between the extreme non-violence of Barney the dinosaur and the comic, cartoon violence of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles—one of several examples of more traditional children's programming, by the way, including "Leave It to Beaver," "The Jetsons," and "Super Mario Brothers," which, by a splendid irony, are now being applied by broadcasters to satisfy the requirements for "educational" material mandated under the Children's Television Act of 1990.

If it means that there will be less Barney and more Turtles, this is the one hopeful development in the sad tale of government regulation of broadcasting. Everything young children experience, every image they consume, is educational. But the images must be considered in their contexts. In the case of the Ninja Turtles, there is still visible some of the moral context of violence so firmly and, it has to be said, mostly boringly predictably established back in the days of "Leave It to Beaver" and "The Jetsons." The heroes on the half shell are still recognizably heroes, their opponents still recognizably villains. But so lurid are the characters, so absurd the plots, so fantastical the images of anthropoid turtles skilled in Oriental fighting techniques, that such stuff must be judged more than halfway toward the "Super Mario Brothers" and the cartoon-like violence characteristic of video games.

There is, presumably, the perfect example of "deglamorized" violence for Senator Simon's edification: two morally indistinguishable electronic images bashing each other in a simulacrum of combat to no other end than the exercise of youthful skills in hand-eye coordination. And all television violence these days aspires to the condition of the video game. It is an abstract ballet of moving images stamped with visual whimsy in such a way as to preclude their identification with *anything* in the real world, let alone with good or evil—or glamour. If we are to turn social engineers we must recognize that the problem pointed to by Senator Simon and Professor Centerwall and so many others is not a result of so-called "violence" on television but of a tendency for violent acts to be detached from any context which could give them meaning.

Maybe the image of the lone lawman standing up to the bad guys was factitious and hackneyed and artistically clumsy, but it provided such a context—one which has dissipated as much in reality as on TV since the glamour of Matt Dillon was superseded by that of Bob Dylan. We need the glamour of discriminating violence in order to offset the collective moral lassitude induced by too much of the undiscriminating kind. Playing Simon Says with the government is certainly not going to bring it back—even if Simon were less simple than he is. Maybe nothing else is either. But if we all work to get as much violence on television as possible, maybe the effort to make sense of it all will result eventually in something like a plausible moral context.

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Books

Robed in images: the memoirs of James Merrill

by John Simon

Forgive me if I start in a seemingly irrelevant way; there's a reason for it. As a sophomore at Harvard, in Robert Hillyer's advanced creative writing course, I wrote a play that I decided to produce myself (no one else wanted to) under the auspices of the United War Relief. It was 1943, in mid-world war, and the subject was appropriate. German officers were holding ten young Yugoslav girls as love slaves in a camp, until one of them managed to bump off a couple of the Nazi swine, whereupon all the girls lost their lives, but their honor was restored. Good for the war effort as the play was, my chief point in directing it and acting one of the two German soldiers was to cast ten of the prettiest Radcliffe girls I could find and then date as many of them as possible.

But the sponsoring United War Relief people were not all that forthcoming with the pittances required. To prod them, and to help with other production problems, I needed a production manager, and found one in Claude Fredericks. Claude was, like me, a bit of a loner; but, unlike me, he was not a Harvard student. Rather, he was a gifted autodidact who indirectly benefited from Harvard's cultural opportunities without indenturing himself to its curricula.

I liked Claude, and he seemed to like me, but I was too self-absorbed to find out much about him. I knew he came from Springfield, Missouri, had a fine grasp of the Classics, and was a charming conversationalist. Curly-haired, merry-eyed yet shy, he spoke with the softest of voices in a strange cooing accent that he had clearly invented for himself. He was gentle, wore bow ties, and was, unbeknown to me, a homosexual. Ignorant about such matters, I thought him a bit odd; but nothing about his behavior around me suggested a different sexual preference.

He was, however, a singularly inappropriate choice for a production manager because of his mild manner and general otherworldliness. Not the one to bully the United War Relief folks for a little more money, or exert pressure on the distinguished panel of academic sponsors to come through with other kinds of help. Only when I invented a *nom de guerre* for him, Dmitri Merezhkovskij (brazenly cribbing the name of the popular biographer, with a minimal change in the spelling), did his phone calls start getting results. Claude's self-effacing voice with the make-believe accent, which might just have been Slavic, now commanded respect.

After my play came and went, Claude went, too. I next heard of him as running a choice little printing press with a gentleman friend in the woods of Vermont, which struck me as a condign *modus vivendi* for a person of such rare and rarefied sensibility, and I was pleased for him. In 1949-50 I spent a Fulbright year in Paris, and it was on my return to Harvard that I learned that Claude was living in Europe with a young poet whose first volume I owned and admired, and whose name was James Merrill. He was also the wealthy son of the millionaire head

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of Merrill, Lynch, and would surely help Claude develop into a literary figure, for which I thought him exquisitely suited.

I remember once running into Claude and James, perhaps even eating with them. I recall only that Merrill struck me as delicate and not very talkative, the latter seeming unusual for a poet. When I ran into Claude again, much later, he was no longer thick with Merrill. Having written a piece for *Vogue* about the best younger poets, which included Merrill, I was eager to pump Claude about him. Discreetly, he stuck to polite generalities. Then Claude became a popular teacher at Bennington College, and I lost sight of him for many years. One day in a Florida airport, I noticed someone reading a volume of Greek poetry in the original; he looked up, and was Claude. We sat together on the flight to New York, and he promised to stay in touch. But he vanished into Vermont, and was not heard from again.

Recently, I was amused to hear that a major character—albeit fictionalized to the point of caricature—in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* was based on Claude, but the novel seemed too long-winded and short-breathed to bother with. And now Claude is back, co-starring in James Merrill's memoir, *A Different Person*, which I've been asked to review.[1] I never got to know Merrill well. Once I was taken to the house in Stonington he shares with David Jackson; another time, to the one they own in Key West. In between, he and I were both guests at a dinner party of W. H. Auden's. He always seemed enormously civilized, distantly cordial, and (perhaps deceptively) frail. If Claude looked like a Murillo *putto* crossed with a Velázquez *picaro*, Merrill seemed a Renaissance princeling painted by an anonymous Italian whose name began in "Attributed to" or "School of."

But what made reading this book about James and Claude and divers others so strange for me was that I knew quite a few of the others as well. Take Tony Harwood (*né* Horowitz, as Merrill tactfully doesn't mention), James's second-best friend at Lawrenceville, and someone I stringently avoided at Harvard. Take the then married couple, the scholar Jonathan Bishop and the future novelist Alison Lurie, my neighbors and just about best friends during grad school. Or Irma Brandeis, who, as Merrill says, was *the* Italian Department at Bard College, where first he, and later I, briefly taught. Robert Isaacson, the third man of the memoir, I never met; but a common friend kept regaling me with stories about him. Does this sort of thing make reviewing a book easier or harder? We shall see.

A Different Person is distinguished by its style. It is written in a poet's prose, using the chisel, the burin, the goldsmith's scissors. The syntax scintillates, cadence is everywhere. Sometimes the tropes are too bejeweled, the preciosity becomes blinding. Consider this childhood reminiscence: "But the lesson of our Meissen plates and Sheraton chairs intimidated me. They kept their own counsel; our postures and hungers affected them hardly at all. The chair shrugged us off, each careful washing rinsed the dish of us, and the objects resumed, like heroines in Henry James, a gleaming, inviolable fineness their uncouth admirer could only fall short of." Or this mosaic at the Tomb of Galla Placidia in Ravenna: "Thousands upon thousands of glass-paste dice—each by itself dull and worthless as a drawn tooth—have been shrewdly cast to embed a texture now matte, now coruscant, with colors fifteen hundred years have failed to dim. Through narrow alabaster panels, their art-deco patterns lymph-washed and bloodless, like human tissue on a slide, comes a glow I try to resist. . . ." Even the shorter images sometimes hover on the verge of excess: "His manners were natural, even humble, like the hut of forest boughs that shelters a great wizard." Or: "Shaped by ideas like everyone else, I nevertheless avert my eyes from them as from the sight of a nude grandparent, not presentable, indeed taboo, until robed in images." There are reefs

1 *A Different Person: A Memoir*, by James Merrill; Knopf, 271 pages, $25.

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among the ripples of poetry, as in the recollection of an Amherst costume party: "It ended badly . . . but what was an ointment without flies? In memory the party shimmers and resounds like a *Fête* by Debussy. Freedom to be oneself is all very well; the greater freedom is not to be oneself." What kind of greater freedom ends in fisticuffs?

What is *A Different Person* about? It is principally an account of two years, 1950 to 1952, spent in Europe by the young poet between the ages of twenty-four and twenty-six. Reading his poetry at his alma mater, Amherst, he has an epiphany: "As I read, part of me listened to how I sounded, nasal, educated, world-weary as only those without experience of the world can be, and thought how much I would like this sound to change; or, failing that, what a relief it would be to live among French or Italians, who wouldn't automatically 'place' me each time I opened my mouth." He hopes to become a different person during these journeys and sojourns, or at least remove the trammels from his old self. "This is where a lover came in. For could I truly have contemplated stripping and plunging into the unknown without [Claude's] life-preserving arms about me?" After a long interval, he had just met Claude again at a party. They had hardly known each other then; now they were lovers embarking on a *vita nuova*.

The happy honeymoon cools as they trot from Austria to France, from Greece to Italy. In Rome, after fifteen months of this, they meet an old friend, Robert Isaacson. Claude hopes to start something with him, but it is James and Robert, who even look alike, that become lovers. Meanwhile Claude and James are both undergoing separate therapies with the same therapist, Dr. Detre, for about a year; then one after the other they return to the States, whither Isaacson has preceded them. Everyone remained friends with everyone, and nothing more.

This framework allows Merrill to write something between a long poetic meditation and a shortish autobiography. He travels even more freely in time than in space, and the narrative, as baggy as the latest Armani and Versace pants, can accommodate just about anything. The points of reference are chiefly lovers present, past, future, and imaginary; but also friends and family. Besides Claude and Robert, there is also the translator and anthologist Kimon Friar, James's teacher and lover at Amherst; David Jackson, Merrill's life companion; and, way in the future, Peter Hooten, a young actor. Also sundry Greek and Italian youths, picked up over the years.

Among the friends, we find Freddy Buechner, the novelist and best pal from Lawrenceville; Tony Harwood, aesthete, *poète manqué*, and school chum No. 2; Hubbell, an outré queen; Count Morra, a somewhat ambiguous war hero; and Hans, a (mostly) dying Dutch poet. A few women, too: Alice B. Toklas, Alison Lurie, Grace Stone. Also Mina, the older consort *cum* patroness of Kimon Friar; and Nina, the much older patroness and consort of Harwood. Both are very foreign, vaguely aristocratic, and good comic relief. Further, the art historian Marilyn Aronsberg ("Culture wasn't, in her case, the blind alley I sometimes feared it was in mine"), and Irma Brandeis, the Bard Italian hand, who turns out to have been Clizia, the lost love of Eugenio Montale.

But the most important woman is Mother, Hellen Ingalls Merrill, the book's heroine if it has one. James adores and dreads her, invokes and quotes her, conducts real and fantasy dialogues with her, reviews her two marriages, and romanticizes even her old age. The purplest passage of this supposedly risqué memoir is this love letter:

> A tinted oval photograph shows her at eighteen with soulful eyes and Cupid's-bow lips, her forehead ringleted, the whole wrapped in a fichu of pink tulle against a studio backdrop of plantation oaks. It bears a clear likeness to my mother even now, while giving no clue to her uncanny, lifelong vitality. (One clue, no doubt, is the daily quarter grain of thyroid extract she has taken since my birth. This emerged when she broke a hip at eighty.

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> Hospitalized without her medication, she lapsed before our eyes, like the beautiful girl at the close of *Lost Horizon*, into an old, old woman. Then she mended, and a tiny white pill again reversed the process.) Late in life, still glancing lovingly at the dance floor, all animation from her first drink, her dark hair barely frosted by the years, she has not lost the ability, or the desire, to draw her companion into that old complicity of vigorous nods and knowing smiles, her slender hand coming to rest on his arm for emphasis. At ninety, my mother has the smooth legs of a girl. Her breasts, glimpsed through a loose peignoir, are large and unwrinkled. The only physical sign of age is in the shoulders—giving out, as if they'd borne too much—and in the slow erosion of her once military spine to a fragile question mark.

Father also figures fairly prominently, but in a much more relaxed, easygoing way. After all, James has already settled his score with him in *The Seraglio*, a *roman à clef* published, revised, and re-published. Other family members likewise put in pleasantly anodyne appearances. Back and forth weaves the memoir until, at last, some sort of web or structure emerges, not entirely cohesive and purposeful, but artfully deployed to suggest a transcendent, albeit opaque, order.

Yet there is something queasy about this book, described by the blurb as "perhaps the most lucid and inward account we have had of a homosexual life in a world of intellect and art." The problem is not the homosexuality (that has long since turned from onus to bonus) or even the somewhat wearisome promiscuity, whether indulged in or merely fantasized. It is rather the question of tact, discretion, accountability, and also of truthfulness. One wonders how seemly it is to tell a tale this intimate about real people with their real names. I am told, too, that Claude Fredericks thinks that he hasn't been accurately portrayed, and some of the others may also feel compromised.

There is always something problematic about a memoir that quotes long-past conversations in great, seemingly authoritative detail. Did Merrill keep a diary? And even then, does one record conversations at such length, in such detail? Or does he have a photographic memory? Or is he just re-creating the feel of those conversations? Both Fredericks and Isaacson are evoked with affection and respect, but even if (I don't know for sure) they agreed to such publication, might they not feel that too much is revealed, or that there is a slant or distortion here and there? True, though sex is omnipresent, there are no detailed descriptions; even so, there is a scene in the book where Claude objects to the mere use of "Portugal" in the title of one of James's poems, Portugal having meant something special to the two of them; well, much more than Portugal is given away here.

Merrill himself is as possessed by art as he is obsessed with sex throughout the book, from his days as lustful ephebe, through his maturity as poet and *bon vivant*, into his incipient old age, surrounded by his *Lebensgefährte* and some younger lovers. I am reminded of these lines from his early poem "Salome": "Whosoever faithfully/ Desires desire more than its object shall/ Find his right heaven, be he saint or brute." Could Merrill be speaking for himself here? Does he believe this? He certainly wants to, for it would justify his libidinal lingerings. Consider, further, these verses from a later poem, "From the Cupola":

> . . . This is me, James,
> Writing lest he think
> Of the reasons why he writes—
> Boredom, fear, mixed vanities and shames;
> Also love.

I see all the above motives represented in *A Different Person*, except the last: there is not much genuine love to be found here, despite some elegant, rather operatic, posturing. And truth, you will have noted, is not mentioned in Merrill's etiology.

What I trust least in the book is the figure of the psychotherapist, Dr. Detre. There is a medical doctor as well, Dr. Simeons, who, in his amiably bumbling way, is quite believ-

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able. Not so Detre. He is supposed to be Hungarian, but his name, whatever it may be, is not Hungarian. And he is too perfect, even for a Hungarian: not only omniscient, but also able to couch his couchside omniscience in epigrammatic, lapidary utterances a Gautier might envy, such as, "Sex between men is by its character frustrating. . . . The anus is full of shit; the mouth is a well of flattery and untruth. The honest penis is left with no reliable place to go." This sounds very much like the analysand writing the analysts's lines, as do other passages. Why, then, not stick your honest pen into fiction?

And while I am complaining, there is one particularly murky passage between pages 189 and 192. It begins: "It was a truth universally acknowledged in those innocent decades from 1950 to 1980 that a stable homosexual couple would safely welcome the occasional extramarital fling." The implication is that this was a mistaken belief of those "innocent decades." Yet on the next pages we get a glowing account of what fun it was for David Jackson and James to seek out threesomes and foursomes in Italy, Greece, and New York bathhouses. "For me those hours were the adolescence I'd been too shy or repressed to put into action at the time. Their polymorphous abundance spilling over into our lives kept us primed and sexually alert towards each other." Well then, those innocent decades must have been more wise than naïve, especially since no one seems to have incurred AIDS. Greek youths are particularly recommended because they all have a fiancée stashed away somewhere, but need to have innocent fun until they can afford to marry. This "seemed to ensure our never going overboard in Greece. David and I could follow with no harm to him the faun incarnate in this or that young man, and without losing ourselves or each other." This sounds contented, even smug. Yet why, then, the tone of rebuke in the next sentence, "We were very optimistic to think so"? And why the numerous hints throughout that the optimism continues? The author wants to have it both ways, extolling the polymorphous decades, yet wagging his finger at them; endorsing the sober ways of the post-AIDS Nineties while flouting them.

Which is not to say that the book doesn't have its beauties. It sovereignly evokes a picture of rich, highly cultivated young American homosexuals living near-idyllic lives (there is a bit too much ego in Arcadia) in an as yet unspoiled Europe, where the very flies enhance the ointment. There are heady portrayals of opera-going in some of Europe's best and worst opera houses. There are enthusiastic descriptions of the wonders of painting, sculpture, architecture lined up in espaliers for the cognoscenti. There are impassioned accounts of privileged landscapes and cityscapes. There are stimulating conversations and sportive confrontations, glimpses of an America better comprehended from afar, and a Europe better enjoyed from inside its nooks and crannies. Merrill catches bits of jaunty dialogue, such as the Roman matron's comment to her fellow diner about Maria Montez dead in her bathtub, "At least she died clean."

There are witty aperçus, as when Merrill observes two of his male friends together: "Pangs reserved exclusively for the gay shot through me—I was jealous of both parties at once." Or this encapsulation of differences between lovers: "Where I was content to 'find myself' in a Fauré song or a Degas interior, Claude identified manfully with a Zen scroll or the *St. John Passion*." Or take this charming vignette *chez* Toklas: "The big white poodle Basket, the original Basket's replacement but still the most famous animal I've ever met, lay at her feet. His manners were plain, even perfunctory, like an old countrified nobleman's; as man of the house, he clearly had his share of nonsense to put up with." There is a delightful account of what words mean to our poet, of how one's art matures through the words one favors:

> What were my recurrent words? No longer, as at sixteen, "pale" or "dim," or even the irresistible names of colors—"violet" or "rose," scented respectively by turbulence and upward movement. The words I never wearied of were rather those adverbs like "still" or "even," or

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> adverbial phrases like "by then" or "as yet" or "no longer," which, sharpening a reader's sense of time, suggested a reality forever in the process of change. . . . "Still," with its triadic resonance of immobility, endurance, and intensification ("Eleanor grew still more animated"), was perhaps the hardest to resist. Deep in the pinewoods of my vocabulary, it yielded an intoxicating moonshine I would keep resorting to in small, furtive sips.

Say what you will against this Merillian world, it has something to recommend it. It has culture down to its fingertips, erudition down to its most frivolous allusions, style suffusing its most trivial pursuits. No matter how well or badly you use it, so much recondite knowledge, concentrated into a sestina or prodigally scattered in small talk, commands wonder. We shall not see the like of it when Merrill and his likes are gone, and we shall be the poorer for it.

Perhaps the most engaging passage in *A Different Person* is this one, which truly conveys "a reality forever in the process of change":

> The house I return to most regularly in America is Claude's. Its rooms remain of a gleaming, exemplary bareness, the books high-minded and intently read. The sad truth is that I shall never live up to him—he who has no more than one lover at a time; who seldom travels farther than thirty miles from home, and then only to meet his students at Bennington; who, exchanging his recorder for a *shakuhachi*, came back from Kyoto a Buddhist. By now he looks like one, rotund and roseate, eyes alert under heavy lids, a loose, much mended kimono sashed round him: Zen-master Time's favorite pupil. Visiting him is restorative.

Could it be that Claude found what James was looking for? He certainly sounds like a different person, which Merrill, surrounded by David, Peter, and Jerl, and the silly Ouija Board that has ruined so much of his fine poetry, does not. But there is time as yet even for him. Still.

State of the essay?

Gore Vidal
United States: Essays 1952-1992.
Random House, 1,295 pages, $37.50

reviewed by Richard Brookhiser

United States collects 114 essays written by Gore Vidal over the last four decades. Despite the reproduction of Jasper Johns's forty-eight-star flag on the dust jacket, less than half of them are about politics. The rest describe books, places, and people he has known.

Johnson's *Dictionary* had hard words for the essay: "an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition." Vidal serves the form better than that. He found his range when Eisenhower was president, and stuck to it. Most of these pieces are anchored to a discussion of some book. If it is a book he likes, Vidal provides a summary that is both detailed and interesting. He favors a bright, staccato prose, which draws its variety from the length of its sentences. Short fragments. Good for facts. These will be followed by long, elliptical tendrils of analysis or appraisal, occasionally wise, often witty, and when neither, at least . . . bitchy.

Vidal's model for his political and historical pieces is Henry Adams. "I cannot remember when I was not fascinated by Henry Adams"—a fascination based on identification, for as Vidal reminds us several dozen times, he too grew up in a political family, although admittedly one of humbler achievements. Adams's grandfather, John Quincy, was author of the Monroe Doctrine, and sixth President. Vidal's maternal grandfather, Thomas Pryor Gore, was one of the first two senators from Oklahoma. Adams's father, Charles Francis, was minister to England during the Civil War. Vidal's father, Eugene, was director of the Bureau of Air Commerce during the first Roosevelt administration. Only in the third generation does Vidal's family nose ahead, for while Henry neither held nor sought public office,

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Gore has run twice for Congress (finishing second, the author's bio notes, in the 1982 California Democratic senatorial primary).

Even as one would not equate the Vidals and the Gores with the Adamses (or the Longs), so one would not mistake Gore Vidal's political writing for Henry Adams's. As early as 1959, Vidal defined his "only serious interest" as a writer to be "the subversion of a society that bores and appalls me." His reasons for being appalled fill the years. Too many of his fellow citizens are "Christers," and monotheism is "easily the greatest disaster to befall the human race." Christers support a "heterosexual dictatorship" (a phrase of Christopher Isherwood's), which is also encouraged by the powers that be, since "in order for a ruling class to rule, there must be arbitrary prohibitions." There must also be lots of children, because the "grim knowledge . . . that if a married man is fired, his wife and children are going to starve, too . . . makes for docility." Alas for the ruling class, the world is headed for famine by the year 2000, so "population will have to be reduced drastically, if not by atomic war then by law, an unhappy prospect for civil liberties but better than starving."

From this broad indictment, various particulars flow. When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, Vidal proposed a defensive alliance of Jews, blacks, and "faggots," since the Christers yearned to put all of them "in the same gas chambers." But he thinks little more of liberal Democrats. Both political factions serve "the Bank"—Chase Manhattan and its partners in oligarchy—as does the press. "*The New York Times* reflects the will of the administration at Washington which in turn reflects the will of the moneyed interests." When the *Times* doesn't do the job, the moneyed interests turn to the likes of Howard Hunt, whom Vidal accuses of masterminding the shooting of George Wallace (to insure Richard Nixon's re-election) and possibly the assassination of John F. Kennedy as well. Given Vidal's opinion of the Kennedys, you would think he would approve of Hunt, but he evidently feels a professional rivalry.

Along about 2005, some biographer may offer a theory to account for this cluster of bizarre and rancorous opinions, so like an anthology of the best of *Outweek* and *Spotlight*. But one explanation that is obvious now is that Vidal doesn't know very much. His political learning seems to be drawn from encyclopedias, a few biographies, reading the papers. He is not a curious or interesting reporter (his coverage of the 1968 Republican convention is included here; read Norman Mailer's). Once in a while he turns in a good day's work: a piece on Eleanor Roosevelt enlivened by recollections; an early talk with Barry Goldwater. Vidal and Goldwater discuss Medicare; Goldwater is opposed. One looks at the federal budget and thinks of what might have been, if only Howard Hunt had not affected the dynamics of the 1964 elections. The one historical figure that has made Vidal settle down and concentrate has been Abraham Lincoln. Here he ably defends his novel *Lincoln* against academic quibblers. Vidal accepts Edmund Wilson's theory of Lincoln as the Nietzschean monster who willed the republic to die so that he might live forever, which is unconventional. But he also accepts the notion that Lincoln was a Union man first, and an opponent of slavery second, which makes nonsense of the events of the 1850s—the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the *Dred Scott* decision—and of Lincoln's reactions to them, but which is the consensus of academics, and of intelligent laymen such as William Safire. When Vidal exerts himself, he rises to the average.

When books are his subject, he rises above it. His literary one-liners are as quotable as his political ones, with the added advantage of being sane. Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* "scores off those who are lost to him anyway, thus proving that essentially the work is politic." John O'Hara recorded his characters' spending habits "with the zest of an Internal Revenue man examining deductions for entertainment." Donald

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Barthelme's stories in *The New Yorker* are "usually decorated with perspective drawings, ominous faces, funny-looking odds and ends. Let the prose do it, I would think severely, and turn the page, looking for S. J. Perelman."

Vidal approaches writing in a spirit of serious pragmatism. The critic's job is to describe a work's virtues to the intelligent general reader; the writer's, to write for him. Vidal has a healthy suspicion of literary theory, especially French: Roland Barthes "put the theory of the New Novelists rather better than they have themselves, a considerable achievement since it is as theoreticians and not as practitioners that these writers excel." He was deploring the shrinkage of the novel's canvas, and of its audience, long before Tom Wolfe got on the case. He tends perhaps as a result to overpraise worldly second stringers like Somerset Maugham and Louis Auchincloss. Or perhaps he only appears to do so because of the scarcity of essays on larger figures. But Vidal dismisses the big look at the big name, with some justice, as "book-chat": "writing at complicated length about writing that has already been much written about. The result[s] . . . cannot interest anyone who knows literature while those who would like to learn something about books can only be mystified and discouraged by these commentaries." Among his violations of his own rule is an essay on Montaigne, the best in *United States*. But he seems happiest celebrating writers one has never heard of, like Dawn Powell, chronicler of life in New York in the era of the Lafayette and the Brevoort hotels; or writers one has heard of but never read, thanks to their having been assigned in high school, like William Dean Howells.

The sweet influence of books even allows Vidal to mention a politician without screeching:

> In the early 1870s Howells and his father paid a call on [James A.] Garfield. As they sat on Garfield's veranda, young Howells began to talk about poetry and about the poets that he had met in Boston and New York. Suddenly, Garfield told him to stop. Then Garfield went to the edge of the veranda and shouted to his Ohio neighbors. "Come over here! He's telling about Holmes, and Longfellow, and Lowell, and Whittier!" So the neighbors gathered around in the dusk; then Garfield said to Howells, "Now go on."
>
> Today we take it for granted that no living president will ever have heard the name of any living poet. This is not, necessarily, an unbearable loss. But it is unbearable to have lost those Ohio neighbors who actually read books of poetry and wanted to know about the poets.

The Ohio neighbors are not lost to Vidal, who is a successful popular novelist. (The proof is the existence of *United States*; publishers do not issue fat volumes of the occasional pieces of noble non-sellers.) But let us agree with Vidal's lament at least as far as poets are concerned. The thought of the national audience, so easily distracted, so often straying, must explain why Vidal's extensive reading has failed to make him wise about anything beyond fiction. Reading and writing, even at the level of Holmes and Howells, is hard work. It requires educated writers, and an educated public. But the pursuit of commerce and the pursuit of happiness, to the extent we distinguish between them, have always coaxed Americans from their books, while the rhetoric of egalitarianism discourages us from opening them in the first place (if Gore Vidal and I are *created* equal, why sweat through his reading list?). Faced with this situation, the elitist has two courses open to him: he can try to raise the general level marginally, or he can rage against the bumpkins. Vidal's reviews over forty years are in effect a modest attempt at level-raising, but he enjoys raging too much to leave it at that.

There is another problem with the bumpkins. Political conspiracy theories are gratifying not least because they allow the theorist with populist pretensions, every two or three hundred pages, to squirt a tear of pity for the poor and the middling whom

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the oligarchs manipulate. But suppose the masses make love and babies, not because Chase Manhattan compels them to, but because they want to? Suppose they vote for Republicans and Democrats (or Perot, or nobody) for the same reason, or because they see no better alternative? With sufficient effort, you might get some people to read Dawn Powell again. But you won't get most people to stop breeding, or to join the New Alliance Party. Gore Vidal would be well advised to stick to his books. It's a big country out there—big, and set in its many ways. His notions about it, from his hopes to his hatreds, have as much relation to the real article as *Flag, 1958* (Jasper Johns) has to a flag.

"Just let me put this bastard on the skids"

Andrew Motion
Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 570 pages, $35

reviewed by Christopher Carduff

They are creatures of the moment, and they've created an end-of-the-century literary genre all their own. If you haven't actually read their books, you've surely skimmed their reviews or perhaps even seen them on the afternoon television talk-show circuit. Their story is always the same, these writers, and it's always delivered with the same straightforward, controlled, and terrible bitterness: *I loved him, he was in many ways a great man, but Daddy wasn't the little tin angel he led us to believe he was.*

Andrew Motion, though he is also a distinguished poet, critic, and editor, is, in his new biography of Philip Larkin, just another such writer. His book is the high-art critical-bio version of *Daddy, Dearest*, but it's *Daddy, Dearest* all the same, and the English-language audience for poetry has been snapping it up like some sort of hardcover tabloid, clucking their tongues with condescending pleasure over just how bad the Old Man really was. Nugget-diggers will find the excellent index invaluable, especially, under "Larkin, Philip Arthur" (1922-1985), the subheadings SEX ("attitude to women . . . complains about expense . . . sexual log books . . . pornography") and ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS ("dislike of children . . . fear of marriage . . . loathing of abroad . . . right-wing politics . . . racism"). It's a map to what Tom Paulin, the British press's foreman nugget-digger, calls "the sewer under the national monument Larkin became."

In his introduction, Motion, sketching the connections among Larkin's art, life, and public persona, lays out the major theme of the book in three memorable sentences: "[M]any of Larkin's inner conflicts evolved in ways his work can only hint at. When he found his authentic voice in the late 1940s, the beautiful flowers of his poetry were already growing on long stalks out of pretty dismal ground. Describing this ground must necessarily alter the image of Larkin that he prepared so carefully for his readers." In other words: How perfect the art. How imperfect the life. And oh what a sham all that charming, curmudgeonly, "Hermit of Hull" crap he served up on a pub-lunch platter. Motion's chief aim as biographer is not to devalue Larkin's *oeuvre*—on the contrary, most of his reading of it is appreciative—but to make us marvel at the paradox of its very existence: for Motion, it's the improbably gorgeous product of a wholly loathsome mind. "To follow [Larkin's] development"—and here Motion means emotional and ideological development, not artistic—"is to have our sense of his achievement sharply increased."

Motion, of course, is not Larkin's son—not, that is, in the literal sense. But to Motion's generation of poets, Larkin was the father-figure, the standard-setter. To Motion himself, as to much of the public, he was the greatest contemporary English poet—indeed, "one of the great poets of the century." And Motion was Larkin's protégé—if Larkin can be said ever to have had one. Thirty years Larkin's junior, Motion first met the poet in

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1976 when he, Motion, was twenty-four and newly appointed a lecturer in English at the University of Hull. Larkin was then fifty-three, and had been the university's librarian for over twenty years. The two became good friends, and in 1983, not long before his death, Larkin asked Motion to become one of his literary executors. "At no time during the nine years of our friendship did we discuss his biography," Motion writes. "He did not ask me to write this book."

Neither did Larkin ask another of his executors, his old friend Anthony Thwaite, to collect and edit his letters. (Whether he wished the letters to be collected at all is uncertain; his will, which has much vexed the trustees of his estate, is contradictory on this and other matters pertaining to the posthumous fate of his unpublished writings.) Thwaite's eight-hundred-page selection, first published in England last fall, will be brought out here by Farrar, Straus in December. It is very much a companion piece to Motion's *Life* in that it gives us, in great detail and at great length, the same "new" picture of Larkin. This Larkin is not the public Larkin of the published interviews, who, with self-deprecating humor, presented us with a highly attractive case of stiff-upper-lip in the face of life's shortcomings and of self-sacrifice in the name of art. This Larkin is the private Larkin, and his picture is painted in darker tones of "racism, misogyny and quasi-fascis[m]" (Tom Paulin again). Both the *Life* and the *Letters* may have been begun by friends wishing to do honor to Larkin's achievement, but in the end, and on the bookshelf together, their fourteen hundred pages seem intended to crush the three skinny books of poems—*The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings*, and *High Windows*—that remain the heart of his *oeuvre*. More exactly, the books seem intended to vandalize—and certainly have had the popular effect of vandalizing—the familiar, shyly smiling image that peered out at us from Larkin's jacket photos. Like the idealized girl on the poster in "Sunny Prestatyn," this image of the poet was too good for this life. It proved an irresistible target to Motion and Paulin and all the other conflicted scribblers who both take excitement from Larkin's work and, consciously or not, hate him for it.

"You know," Larkin once wrote to Thwaite, "I was never a child: my life began at 21, or 31 more likely. Say with the publication of *The Less Deceived*." This was one of Larkin's many ways of saying that only his art really mattered; all else, including the "biographical sources" of that art, was dross. But Larkin was, of course, a child once, and he remained forever his parents' son. Motion is at his most sympathetic when writing of Larkin's early years and the ways they shaped his sensibility.

Larkin's father, Sydney, a government accountant in Coventry, filled his son with the faults he had, but also imparted his virtues. He was, in Motion's words, "intolerant to the point of perversity, contemptuous of women, careless of other people's feelings or fates, yet at the same time excitingly intellectual [and] inspirationally quick-witted." Larkin's mother, Eva, a cosseting parent and a cowed wife, was passive, snobbish, and forever bewailing her lot. In an unpublished memoir, Larkin wrote that "the marriage left me with two convictions: that human beings should not live together, and that children should be taken from their parents at an early age."

According to Motion, Sydney Larkin's chief legacy to his son was twofold: a taste for literature, especially Thomas Hardy, and a tendency toward what Motion calls "reactionary politics." (Sydney was a Nazi sympathizer, may have been part of a British para-Nazi organization called the Link, and kept a mechanical statuette of Hitler on the mantelpiece at home that, at the touch of a button, sprang into the "Sieg Heil!" salute.) He died in 1948, when Larkin was twenty-five. Eva Larkin's legacy was a good deal more complicated. Motion makes her out to be both Larkin's deepest emotional attachment and, more than any other woman in his life, his muse. "Although [she] was often silly," he writes, "although she often drove

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Larkin into agonies of boredom and frenzies of rage, the ties which bound her to her son were not merely comforting but inspirational. They connected Larkin to his past, to memories of hope and excitement, and to the creative 'sense of being young.' Until the end of her life"—she lived on to the age of ninety-one, and Larkin didn't long survive her—"Eva . . . crucially influenced the accents and attitudes of his poems." Indeed, says Motion, "many of his best [poems] were either triggered by her or about her: 'Love Songs in Age,' 'Reference Back,' 'To the Sea,' 'The Building,' 'The Old Fools,'" and, finally, "Aubade." This said, it strikes one as decidedly odd that Larkin's letters to his mother—there are several hundred extant, for after his father died, he wrote her at least twice a week—are scarcely quoted by Motion and don't figure into Thwaite's collection at all.

After Coventry came Oxford, where Larkin struck out with the girls, flirted with at least one young man, and, at the prompting of his friend Kingsley Amis, began to write imaginative prose—mock-lesbian romances, mostly, set in a girl's school. Despite his best efforts to play the Bad Boy—to keep his reading strictly off the syllabus and to spend his nights in jazz cellars—Larkin took a First. He left Oxford without plans, longing to become a great writer and hunting for a trade that would both complement that desire and suit his temperament. Quite by accident, while paging through the Help Wanted section of the *Birmingham Post*, he discovered an opening for a librarian position in Wellington, Shropshire. He applied for the job and got it, beginning a distinguished career in librarianship that would take him, in 1955, to the University of Hull.

By that time—he was then thirty-two—he had already completed the bulk of his writing. There had been two remarkably accomplished novels, *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*, and the beginnings of a never-to-be-completed third. He had brought out a book of poems, *The North Ship*, and found a publisher for his first mature collection, *The Less Deceived*. In an interview with the London

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Observer, Larkin would later call this "probably the 'intensest' time of my life"; for Andrew Motion, who once remarked that "obviously I regret not having known him when he was writing more fluently," they were also his most admirable. What followed, much to Motion's "obvious regret," were three decades of fame, frustrated creativity, and, consequently, lack of authenticity. "All the faces, voices, attitudes, beliefs, jokes and opinions that had evolved during his growth to maturity were," with the popular success of his second book of poems, "suddenly enshrined in the personality which the public decided was 'him.' Like the characteristics he later described in 'Dockery and Son,' they hardened into all he'd got." Larkin suddenly became "Larkin," a character of whom his biographer disapproves.

"Fame," writes Motion, "endangered [Larkin's] poems by threatening the delicate balance between a desire for private rumination and a longing for a public hearing. He wondered how he could continue to 'be himself' if his self depended on remoteness and disappointment, neither of which he could truly be said to possess any more." Here and elsewhere throughout the latter half of the book, Motion is arguing that Larkin, by winning what every poet hopes for (readers, reviews, and respect) and yet rejecting all the perks of the modern poet's "profession" (writer-in-residence sinecures, television appearances, public readings, book tours, etc.), was being hypocritical or even clinically perverse. All that poet-of-deprivation stuff should have been abandoned after 1955, and Larkin should have "developed" beyond it, moved on to other and perhaps sunnier incarnations. He should have "improved" himself, but instead he patented "Larkinism," a private-label poetic shtick. Increasingly, "he was tempted to freeze his life in postures of continuing unhappiness. As far as his work was concerned, this meant making things out to be worse than they actually were, and at the same time denying that there was anything redemptively strange or unique involved in writing about them."

Even worse, Larkin's fame justified him in his selfishness. "The success of *The Less Deceived* strengthened his resolve to live alone," to have no obligations but to himself and his art. "Never mind that his rate of production was so low (only two poems in 1956)—he now regarded every [positive] development in his career as proof that he was right to behave as he did." And, Motion argues, Larkin behaved very badly, especially toward his women.

In his adult life, there were four. There were Patsy Strang, the free-spirited wife of an acquaintance in Belfast; Maeve Brennan, a member of his staff at Hull; and Betty Mackereth, his personal secretary. But first and foremost there was Monica Jones, whom he met in 1947, when he was a librarian at the University College of Leicester and she a lecturer in English. Except for his mother, she was the most important person in Larkin's life, and she survives him as co-trustee of his estate and, with Thwaite and Motion, one of his literary executors. Although I'm certain the author doesn't see it this way, she emerges as the true heroine of Motion's book when, after being asked by the dying Larkin to do so, she arranges to have his diaries fed to the Hull University Library shredder. She also appears to have been admirably stingy about sharing her most intimate letters from Larkin with her fellow-executors.

What did Larkin get out of these relationships with women, none of which, he was adamant, would ever end in marriage, and three of which, those with Monica, Maeve, and Betty, he juggled at one time? Beyond providing the pleasures of sexual companionship, these love affairs "activated," Motion argues, "a dramatic struggle between life and work on which his personality [and his poems] depended." By dividing his affections among two or more women at once, Larkin ensured emotional disappointment for every party involved, disappointment he could then (sometimes) turn into poetry. Furthermore, his candid acknowledgments

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of faithlessness, like his openness about his habit of masturbating to pornography, made it clear to would-be wives that he was promised to no one but himself.

Larkin's taste in pornography, like his taste in everything else, was essentially conventional. (His friend Robert Conquest called it "really very unchallenging. Perhaps a bit of spanking, that's all.") Unchallenging or not, that Larkin had *any* kind of taste for it clearly unsettles Motion, as does the wildly abusive language about women (and "wogs" and "socialists" and so on) that peppers many of Larkin's letters, especially those to old schoolmates such as Kingsley Amis. That Larkin the letter-writer was often playing to his recipients' expectations—that he was trying to keep a wartime schoolchum camaraderie and a damn-the-world adolescent's worldview alive for old time's sake—is cold comfort to Motion. For Larkin to have used such language in his youth, back when the world was less enlightened about "the other," is one thing. For him to have used such language even into the 1980s is unforgivable.

This is why Motion saves his most severe blasts for the last years of Larkin's life, the years between the publication of his final book of poems, *High Windows* (1974), and his death, at age sixty-three, in 1985. It was during these years, when the poems were no longer coming, that his "anger and sense of futility kept pace with each other, driving the comedy out of his extravagant opinions and clouding the pleasures that remained to him." In other words, "his frustration as a writer had by now affected all his judgements." That Larkin professed in an interview to "adore" Margaret Thatcher is offered up as definitive proof of his jadedness, of his having gone totally beyond the pale. Motion cites this tidbit no fewer than four times, with the word "adore" always in scare quotes.

Martin Amis, writing about the *Life* in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*, wrote that "in Andrew Motion's book we have the constant sense that Larkin is somehow falling short of the cloudless emotional health enjoyed by (for instance) Andrew Motion." As an effort to catch the between-the-lines condescension of biographer to subject, this sentence can scarcely be improved. But Motion is not merely condescending, he is, by the book's final pages, wholly out-of-sympathy, unable or unwilling to imagine Larkin from the inside out. Larkin saw him coming, or someone very much like him, when he dreamed up "Jake Balokowsky, my biographer," in the poem "Posterity." Balokowsky is the jeaned-and-sneakered embodiment of the Sixties-generation literary professional, a careerist who laments that, in writing Larkin's life, "I'm stuck with this old fart at least a year." "Just let me put this bastard on the skids," he says, "I'll get a couple of semesters leave/ To work on Protest Theater." What's Larkin *really* like? a friend enquires. "Christ, I just told you," he replies:

> "Oh, you know the thing,
> That crummy textbook stuff from Freshman Psych,
> Not out of kicks or something happening—
> One of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys."

At the end of his *Observer* interview, Larkin says: "I should hate anybody to read my work because he's been told to and told what to think about it." For my part, I should hate anybody *not* to read Larkin because he's been told what to think about the man and so thinks he needn't bother. There's a brand-new generation of readers that believes, and is being instructed to believe, that flowers grown from dismal ground are not worth picking. Well, Larkin's flowers are of a hardy strain, and they will survive the present miasma in which they must live, the poisonous and obscuring atmosphere created by the *Letters* and the *Life* and the Paulins among their reviewers. "Church Going," "Dockery and Son," "The Whitsun Weddings," "An Arundel Tomb," "Aubade": go read them again, now, and *aloud*. To do so is to be moved by them afresh and to drown out all the irrelevant noise about the "unfortunate" circumstances of their composition.

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Priapic polymath

Edmund Wilson The Sixties: The Last Journal, 1960-1972. Edited, with an introduction, by Lewis M. Dabney. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 968 pages, $35

reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers

Edmund Wilson carried on the cultural and critical tradition of Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold. His erudition, intelligence, and insight made him the most distinguished and influential American man of letters in the twentieth century. "He read," as Thackeray said of Macaulay, "twenty books to write a sentence, and traveled a hundred miles to write a line of description." His interests ranged from the biographical and historical interpretation of literature in his masterpieces—*Axel's Castle* (1931), *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), and *Patriotic Gore* (1962)—to a study of the revolutionary personality in *To the Finland Station* (1940), from biblical scholarship to the traditional ceremonies of the Zuñis and Iroquois.

During the last twelve years of his life Wilson frequently shifted between his home in Wellfleet on Cape Cod and his ancestral Stone House in Talcottville, north of Utica, in upstate New York, between Boston and Manhattan, London, Paris, and Rome. He also took trips to Hungary in 1964 and to Jordan and Israel (where he read "Dick Tracy" at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre) in 1967, and spent a recuperative month in Jamaica in 1969. He taught the literature of the Civil War at Harvard, endured a fellowship year at "the blind little backwater" of Wesleyan, published *Night Thoughts*, *Patriotic Gore*, *O Canada*, *The Bit Between My Teeth*, *A Prelude*, *Upstate*, and *A Window on Russia*, and brought out revised editions of four other books.

Wilson had always engaged in controversy, which intensified as he grew older and more combative. He witnessed and reported the Harlan County coal-miners' strikes in the early 1930s, quarreled bitterly with the Communists after his disillusioning visit to the Soviet Union in 1935, fell out with Evelyn Waugh in 1945, had his vividly erotic *Memoirs of Hecate County* burned and suppressed in 1946, threw himself into the battles about the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1955, and defended the Iroquois against dispossession by the New York State Power Authority in 1959. After being prosecuted and heavily fined by the United States government for not paying his taxes, he fought a spirited campaign against American involvement in Vietnam in *The Cold War and the Income Tax* (1963), bitterly disputed the Russian prosody of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* with his old friend and protégé Vladimir Nabokov in 1965, and opposed academic dullness and pedantry with his own humane learning in "The Fruits of the MLA" (1968).

Lewis Dabney's competent, though derivative and rather dull, introduction to the last and longest of Wilson's diaries lacks the style and insight of Leon Edel's definitive prefaces to the previous four volumes. Dabney provides no explanation of what and how much has been omitted. His scrappy, haphazard annotations offer what information he possesses rather than what the reader requires. Though he annotates Lytton Strachey and *Scrutiny*, he does not explain, for example, the Nahum *pesher*, John Nevil Maskelyne, Charley Curtis, René Etiemble, Emilio Cecchi, and the Englishman who wrote about Esther Murphy in the *New Statesman*. Dabney also fails to identify the young man "interested in Dickens" (Steven Marcus), "the aunt who always hated Scott Fitzgerald" (Rosalind Sayre Smith), Lampedusa's cousin (Lucio Piccolo), Svetlana Stalin's irritating Montenegrin mother-in-law (Olgivanna Wright), and fails to explain that the "Brahmin-priest S. Ouza" is named Souza and comes from Catholic Goa, that the stuffed corpse of Jeremy Bentham is exhibited in a wheeled glass case in University College, London, that the fine scholar Newton Arvin was brutally fired by Smith College when his homosexual pornography was discovered, and that Private Meek in Shaw's

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Too True to Be Good is based on T. E. Lawrence.

Ignorant of foreign languages, Dabney has littered the diaries of the multilingual and scrupulously accurate Wilson with many careless errors. The names of David Livingstone, Alexander Gerschenkron, and Gerold Frank, as well as the words *rifiuto* and Navona, are misspelled. "Siren from the sea" is tautological. "Lions" is omitted from an inscription at Bomarzo; *belve* (plural) is mistranslated as "beast." The Russian *poshlost*, which Nabokov defines as "philistine vulgarity," is variously rendered as "crassness" and "mediocrity"; Spanish and Italian are mingled and mangled when Holy Week in Seville, Semana Santa, becomes "Santa Settimano." Chaim Soutine, the Lithuanian-born Expressionist, is called a "French Impressionist."

But all the blemishes belong to the editor. Wilson's intensely active social life, with ordinary folk in upstate New York and artistic eminences at the Kennedy White House, as well as with the many Hungarians and Russians whom he spoke to in their native languages, provides a cultural as well as a personal history of his time. He goes to numerous plays, concerts, and films, pays serious attention to food and drink (which causes many hangovers), and tries to recapture the intellectual ideal of the 1920s: "I still expect something exciting: drinks, animated conversation, gaiety: an uninhibited exchange of ideas."

Wilson loves literary gossip and acerbic wit, and enlivens his diary by quoting or inventing many savage remarks about writers and friends: "Rilke was the greatest lesbian poet since Sappho," Stravinsky is called "the insect," Capote is "a not unpleasant little monster, like a fetus with a big head." Silone is impotent, Sheilah Graham "as amoral as Moll Flanders." The "Oxford-cliquish" Isaiah Berlin "behaves like royalty," Cyril Connolly, who steals books from his friends' houses, "has a queer mixture of lordly courtesy with boorishness and infantilism." Auden's creased face looks like "some kind of technical map." Spender "occasionally makes little digs at [Auden] but is otherwise overcome by him." Malraux's method of argument is "to make a point, say '*Bon!*,' then press on to another point without giving the other person a chance to discuss the previous one." When Arthur Schlesinger blatantly asks the sozzled Stravinsky how it feels to be a guest at the White House, the composer replies: "It—feels—dronk!"—and Kennedy tells Schlesinger: "Go to your kennel." Lowell's precarious mania is "like hurricane warnings on the Cape." But Wilson always enjoys "his wide range of reading and reference, and his feeling for the important things in literature. What he says is probing and witty, sometimes perverse, with a desire to startle."

Wilson's artistic judgments are more objective and (except for his blindness about Conrad) consistently sound. He praises the underrated work of D'Annunzio, Lampedusa, Malraux, and Max Beckmann; condemns as empty, bogus, and boring the films of Antonioni and Resnais, the plays of Hellman and Pinter, the novels of Susan Sontag. Goethe's *Faust* is egoistic, pompous, and undramatic. Wilson, who greatly admires Auden's technical virtuosity, believes that William Carlos Williams "ruined American poetry by leading most of the poets to give up verse altogether and lapse into 'shredded prose.'" Fed up with a pretentious lecture by the trendy Ihab Hassan on "Metacriticism," Wilson prophetically asserts: "Since we weren't going to need literature, how much less should we need criticism? . . . It is utterly silly that the [Wesleyan] faculty should be feeding the students such stuff. They will make them into cultural delinquents."

Wilson's diaries mix memory and desire. He remembers Edna Millay, the first woman he ever made love to, telling him: "I know just how you feel: it was here, and it was beautiful, and now it's gone!" He is also illuminating about his volatile third wife, Mary McCarthy, who was "temperamentally always in the opposition" and loved "a good old dramatized Irish scene." With the or-

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phaned McCarthy, he was "cast as the horrid false father, her uncle, and the things that, in her hysteria, she would accuse me of were usually his crimes and not mine." When they meet in Paris, she regretfully says "I was too young" and he answers "I was too old."

Wilson adores his beautiful, aristocratic, half-German, half-Russian fourth wife, Elena. He gives a vivid account of her background and character, and describes their sexual life. Her mother's family were ladies-in-waiting at the Tsarina's court, she was born into a champagne-manufacturing family in Rheims and was divorced from a Canadian businessman. Wilson, in old age, has evolved from the priggish young scholar, whom E. E. Cummings called "the man in the iron necktie," into the Churchillian potentate with the fine features of a Roman senator. He is stocky, short-legged, and paunchy. His large square head is set on a solid short neck, his jawbone is slung forward, and his mouth resembles a letter slot. He is plagued by physical illness and suffers from lost teeth, deafness, an eye hemorrhage, a fractured vertebra, gout, arthritis, angina, an infarct, and several coronaries. But his sexual appetite, if not his performance, is as vigorous as ever. "I wanted to make love to Elena," he records, "and greedily kissed her breasts and her lovely little rose. She came, but as now happens so often, I was unable to finish in her. . . . I told her that making love to her had been the most wonderful thing in my life."

But their sexual life did not completely satisfy him. While Elena was on the Cape, he fell in love with two other young married women in upstate New York: his Hungarian teacher and his dentist's wife. When he kissed Mary Pcolar and grappled with her armored underwear, she whispered: "I want to, but I won't. . . . I'm afraid you'd have a heart attack." He first sees Anne Miller swimming naked, soon proceeds to "further intimacies," but is refused "the final favor." He suggests fellatio and she demurely replies "I'm a lady." Despite alcoholism and heart disease, Wilson continued to be a sexual predator and seduced another lady friend —disguised here as "O."—at the Princeton Club when he was seventy-five.

Early and late, however, Wilson's greatest passion was his work. He took all human learning for his province, and his method, he explained, was "the avoidance of generalization, the description of the events always in concrete detail. The larger tendencies are shown by a chronicle of individualized persons and actions." Despite the honors and prizes bestowed by his grateful readers during his last decade, he would, while at stool, "read the folders of old reviews of my books, in order to support my morale." S. Y. Agnon, whom Wilson met in Israel, identified the sources of his intellectual power by writing that he had "been graced by God with an eye to see and a heart to understand." And Wilson, who retained a lifelong attachment to the Jews, had Moses' exhortation to Israel in Deuteronomy 31:6—"Be strong and of a good courage"—engraved in Hebrew on his tombstone in Wellfleet.

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Notebook

Another sun person heard from

by Terry Teachout

The antics of Leonard Jeffries, chairman of the black-studies department at City College of New York, noted Afrocentrist, and originator of the terms "sun people" (i.e., blacks) and "ice people" (i.e., whites), were widely reported in the press last spring. Nominally removed from his chairmanship in 1992 for incompetence, Jeffries was in fact dismissed for engaging in gross, flagrant, and—most important—public anti-Semitism. His formal evaluations by college officials had been satisfactory right up to (and, incredibly, after) the day he gave a taxpayer-supported speech at the Empire State Black Arts and Cultural Festival in which he explained, among other things, how Jews financed the African slave trade, a revelation he had previously vouchsafed to his students. Jeffries promptly sued the City University of New York, of which CCNY is a part, claiming he had been given the boot not for being a bad chairman but for having lawfully exercised his constitutionally protected right to free speech. In May, a federal jury agreed with Jeffries, ordering CUNY to fork over four hundred thousand dollars in recompense, and Judge Kenneth Conboy subsequently ordered him restored to his chairmanship.

One of the interesting things about Jeffries is the fact that he has so few respectable defenders. Most of what has been written about him in the mass media since he lurched into the spotlight four years ago (Jeffries helped draft "A Curriculum of Inclusion," the now-infamous report on multicultural education commissioned by New York State Education Commissioner Thomas Sobol) has been contemptuous in the extreme. Even *The New Yorker*, which normally devotes itself to the reflexive praise of all things politically correct, took time out from sucking up to Bill and Hillary Clinton to devote eleven pages of its June 7 issue to a brutally frank profile of Jeffries. The piece, written by James Traub, was full of quotes from prominent black academics who hastened to distance themselves from Jeffries's ravings. Michele Wallace, a professor in CCNY's English department, went so far as to suggest that his conduct threatened to undermine the legitimacy of black studies itself:

> Leonard Jeffries is not rational. It's not possible to absorb sun people and ice people into a rational view. My view of Leonard Jeffries is that he's a maniac—and you can't assimilate a maniac. Jeffries should be marginalized. . . . A lot of students are confused. They don't understand the difference between Edmund Gordon [Jeffries's temporary replacement as chairman] and Leonard Jeffries. And I think a number of us need to take on this task if black studies is ever going to be a serious area.

A few days after James Traub's profile of Leonard Jeffries was published, I read Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Black Studies, Rap,*

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and the Academy.[1] Viewed from one angle, Houston Baker is everything that Leonard Jeffries is not. So far as is known to the fact checkers of *The New Yorker*, Jeffries has published nothing; Baker is the author of numerous books. Save among his Afrocentric buddies, Jeffries is disreputable; Baker is not only reputable but fashionable, or so one gathers from the dust jacket of *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, on which can be found snippets of praise from such publications as *The New York Times Book Review*, *Washington Post Book World*, and the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* ("If one person could embody the trajectory of black literature and literary theory in the post-apartheid era of American higher education, Houston Baker is that person"). He is even a past president of the Modern Language Association. But Jeffries and Baker have two relevant things in common: both are black, and both are in charge of black-studies departments. Baker directs the Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is professor of English and Albert M. Greenfield Professor of Human Relations.

Looking at Houston Baker's resumé, one naturally supposes him to be the sort of person Michele Wallace has in mind when she speaks of black studies as a "serious area." His books, for example, are published by the University of Chicago Press, which is also, a glance at my bookshelves reminds me, the publisher of Leslie Marchand's *Byron: A Portrait*, Richard Posner's *The Essential Holmes*, Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, Anthony Powell's *Miscellaneous Verdicts*, and Clement Greenberg's *Collected Essays and Criticism*, to pick five titles at random. That is fast company, but the University of Chicago Press is plainly unafraid of the implicit comparison. Indeed, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* is the first volume in the series "Black Literature and Culture," edited by none other than Houston A. Baker, Jr. To top it all off, the book is, according to the preface, "the result of a short-term visiting fellowship at Princeton University. Professor Arnold Rampersad of American Studies and Professor Victor Brombert of the Council of the Humanities graciously invited me to present lectures as a Whitney J. Oates Fellow during the spring of 1992." Morris Zapp couldn't have put it better.

I didn't know much about Houston Baker prior to reading his latest book, though I had run across his name more than once.[2] Nor do I know much about black studies as an academic discipline, other than what I read in the magazines; it was still getting off the ground when I was going to school. I do, however, know something about rap, partly because I live in Manhattan, where it is ubiquitous, and partly because I mugged up the subject a couple of years ago at the request of an editor, producing in due course an article from which Baker quotes (without comment) on page 49 of his book. More to the point, I know serious scholarship when I see it, having consumed a carload of it in my time. The arrival of *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* thus seemed to me in the highest degree opportune—a chance to find out at first hand about one of the "serious" practitioners of black studies whose reputation Leonard Jeffries is allegedly damaging.

The argument of *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* can be summed up briefly: (1) Black studies is an indispensable part of American higher education. (2) Rap is a creative and authentic expression of the urban black experience and should thus be taken seriously by academics, particularly those working in the field of black studies. (3) Anyone who disagrees with (1) or (2) is a racist. Mind you, Baker doesn't actually call critics of black studies (or rap) "racists"—he's

1 *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, by Houston A. Baker, Jr.; University of Chicago Press, 110 pages, $16.95.

2 Some of Baker's earlier activities were discussed in this magazine's "Notes & Comments" for February 1993, as well as in Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Harper & Row, 1990).

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too smart for that. There are subtler ways to sling the mud:

> The late Allan Bloom's influential *The Closing of the American Mind* commences with a sullen and dyspeptic account of the arrival of Black Studies [the term is always capitalized in *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*] at Cornell. This arrival is described by Bloom in darkly Miltonic terms as Paradise Lost, an expulsion from the academic garden of White Male Philosophical Privilege.
>
> From a Black Studies perspective, the past twenty-five years have been a journey from bare seasons of migration to the flowering of scholarly innovation. From a conservative white male perspective, these same years must have seemed an enduring crisis, each new day and work of Black Studies bringing fresh anxieties of territorial loss.

Forgive me for not wheeling out the big guns, but life is too short to waste time wrangling over this kind of prattle, or the ideology that drives it. Neither is it worth summarizing Baker's views on rap, since they are, controlling for polysyllables, mostly indistinguishable from those of the average thirteen-year-old, and are in any case asserted rather than demonstrated. Instead, I want to concentrate on certain stylistic aspects of *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* which reveal far more about Houston Baker than any respectful parsing of his ideas ever could.

Baker shifts into high rhetorical gear on the very first page, informing us that black studies is "a narrative of Hagar's children redeemed from exile by the grace of affirmative action and the intentionality of Black Power. It is a vernacular tale, resonant with rhythm and blues." Having read the remaining 109 pages of *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* with some care, I can assure you that this one is wholly representative. Indeed, the book is a veritable *omnium gatherum* of latter-day academic clichés. Here are a few of the more noteworthy varieties:

Loud, flatulent praise of the Sixties. "In the midsixties, the quiet of the American university—whether garden or factory—was shattered forever by the thundering 'NO' to all prior arrangements of higher education in America issued by the Free Speech Movement (FSM)."

Even louder and more flatulent denunciation of the Eighties. "Most of the population of the United States is financially hard-pressed, crippled by the absence of justice in everyday life, and distressingly aware that an unseemly white-male profittaking during the 1980s has brought the United States to the precipice of human disaster."

Pseudo-heterodoxy. According to the dust jacket, "the book's most controversial moment" comes when Baker supports the banning by Florida's Broward County of 2 Live Crew's album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, which Henry Louis Gates, Jr., praised on the op-ed page of *The New York Times* for its "exuberant use of hyperbole." (One wonders how Gates would react were one of his white students to stand up in class and deliver himself of an exuberantly hyperbolic speech in praise of rape consisting mainly of the words *bitch* and *motherfucker*.) Says Baker, striding fearlessly into single combat with the grand panjandrum of black studies:

> I believe 2 Live Crew's album was understandably banned. And I believe [wait for it] that if women and minorities were empowered to assume genuine agency in American society, other such albums would probably be banned, along with Andrew Dice Clay, *Hustler*, *Penthouse*, and peep shows. Though social scientists and policy analysts are fearful of declaring a correlation between the volume of violent, obscene, antiwoman drivel available in the United States and the incidence of violence against women, common sense alone suggests such a correlation. . . . I am certainly *not* suggesting that the criminal prosecution of popular artists should become a United States norm. Nor am I advocating the institution of a kind of State PC (in this instance, "popular culture") police force to roam the land instituting "standard" words and works in lieu of popular idioms. . . . I believe Tipper Gore *is* a

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puritanical busybody who should not be listened to by anyone under the age of 135.

Now *that's* controversial.

Preening. "I recently (February 1990) had the experience of crossing the Atlantic by night, followed by a metropolitan ride from Heathrow Airport to North Westminster Community School in order to teach Shakespeare's *Henry V* to a class of GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) students. . . . To make an exciting pedagogical story brief, we took off—as a group. I showed them how Henry V was a rapper—a cold dissing, def con man, tougher-than-leather and smoother-than-ice, an artisan of words. . . . eight or nine of the students surrounded me after class seeking, as they put it, 'scholarships' to go back with me to America—'now, Sir!'"

Incessant use of tin-eared jargon. "*Black Studies* became a sign of conjuncture that not only foregrounded the university as a space of territorial contest, but also metaphorized the contest itself in a way that allowed the sign to serve as a simulacrum."

Embarrassing use of teenage slang. "It seems high time, then, for those of us who are inside to get seriously busy about the business of Black Studies for the nineties—to bust a move and rigorously bring the scholarly noise for a new generation." (Get down, Grandpa.)

Simple ignorance. Among the names Baker misspells: S. I. Hayakawa, Carol Iannone, Catharine MacKinnon, Salman Rushdie.

Plain old bad writing. "Then perhaps we would not only see the horror of that black woman who was forced to a Brooklyn rooftop, raped, and murdered in the same time frame as the Central Park jogger assault, a rape and murder that were very much unreported [if so, how did Baker hear about them?]; we might also find in our new public concern both exacting and effective ways to channel the transnational capital of everyday rap into a spirited refiguration of black urban territories—a refiguration that would foreclose even the possibility of such horrendous black woman victimization as that in Brooklyn, and a refiguration that certainly would prevent the veritable silencing of such obscenity."

Here we arrive at the heart of the matter. Put aside Baker's politics for a moment and concentrate on the *aesthetics* of that last sentence, and the hundreds of others like it with which *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* is stuffed to the eyeballs. Can there really be any doubt that a man capable of publishing such prose is demonstrably unworthy of being entrusted with the education of English majors, whatever their race, creed, color, or sexual orientation?

As I said earlier, I know very little about black studies as a formal discipline, though I'm not especially sympathetic to it in the abstract. I don't see that it makes a great deal of sense to study "black history," or "black art," in ghettoized isolation. This approach, taken to the lunatic extremes to which academics take everything nowadays, is at once condescending and destructive. If Richard Wright is worth taking seriously as an artist, surely it is because he was, to borrow Bruce Bawer's formulation, a gifted writer who happened to be black, not a Black Writer who happened to be gifted. Least of all does he profit from being yoked with the woozy likes of, say, Alice Walker. Who gains from *that* comparison? At the same time, I recognize that black studies is, at least in theory, a coherent concept. It is not at all difficult to imagine what an intellectually responsible black-studies department might choose to teach, and how it might go about doing so.

But black studies in practice is too often the product not of responsible intellectual inquiry but of far baser motives. Consider the case of the black-studies department at City College of New York, which was founded two decades ago in response to—what else?—student protests. (*Though we know we should defeat you, we have not the time to meet you./ We will therefore pay you cash to go away.*) Leonard Jeffries was hired straight out of graduate school to head the department and immediately granted tenure, presumably as a condition of his hiring, after

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which he was left almost entirely to his own devices. "It was never much of a department," a lawyer for City University of New York claimed at Jeffries's trial. "In the last fifteen years or so, you could count the published scholarly works of City College's black-studies department on the fingers of two hands."

Yet no one at CCNY was willing to challenge Jeffries on the merits—to openly assert that he and his colleagues (virtually all of whom he hired) were incompetent hacks—until he forced the issue by dragging his employers to court. Not that CCNY officials subsequently leapt to the defense of academic standards. Indeed, it was precisely because their testimony was so half-hearted, and because Jeffries's formal evaluations had all been satisfactory, that Joseph Fleming, Jeffries's lawyer, was able to persuade a jury in essence that his client was fired not because he was incompetent but because he was anti-Semitic.

Arguing in court last spring against Jeffries's reinstatement as chairman, New York Assistant State Attorney General Kathie Ann Whipple played what she doubtless assumed to be the ultimate trump card by claiming that Jeffries "does not grasp the sensitivities and sensibilities essential for working in an ethnically diverse environment." This statement is worth a closer look. In CCNY's eyes, Leonard Jeffries's besetting sin was *insensitivity*. (That is a pretty flossy word for the man who once called Diane Ravitch "the ultimate, supreme, sophisticated debonair racist . . . a sophisticated Texas Jew," but never mind.) His scholarship, or lack of it, was viewed as a purely secondary consideration. And so it was, at least to the cynical administrators who built the bully pulpit from which Jeffries continues to cram the gospel of Afrocentrism down the throats of ignorant undergraduates who know no better.

One would like to think this sordid tale an exception to the rule. But, as James Traub explains in his *New Yorker* profile, it is in fact characteristic of many, perhaps most, black-studies departments:

> Black students at campuses all over the country began demanding separate programs and living facilities; above all, they demanded the establishment of programs of black studies—in effect, a department of their own. For many scholars, black and white, such ultimatums represented an assault on the intellectual integrity of the university. But college officials found that a black-studies department was a relatively cheap way to buy campus peace. The Marxist historian Eugene Genovese accused these administrators of practicing "a benevolent paternalism that is neither more or less than racist." The subsequent neglect of conventional academic standards in many black-studies departments suggests that Genovese was right.

So, I hasten to add, does the fact that the University of Chicago Press chose to publish *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, a vulgar, stupid, and totally unscholarly book that is "literate" in precisely the same sense that a man who tarts up his prose with two-dollar words gleaned from *Roget's* is literate. If I were an editor at a publishing house, and this book had been submitted to me by an unknown author, I would have rejected it without a second thought. But, of course, it is not the work of an unknown author. It is the work of a specialist in black studies who has been deemed worthy of an endowed chair, a book series of his own, and—I would venture to bet—a six-figure contract that doesn't require him to teach very much.

To be sure, Houston Baker, Jr., is no worse than the rest of his fellow literary-theory racketeers. He commits no literary offenses that cannot be found in a hundred other equally stupid books published by a hundred other professors of other colors. More important, he is no Leonard Jeffries. But these things are beside the point. Everybody admits that Jeffries is the living embodiment of black studies at its worst. If the author of *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* is truly representative of the *best* black studies has to offer, then it necessarily follows that black

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studies is a joke, a pitiful and preposterous burlesque of scholarship foisted on the academy in the holy name of diversity.

Which brings us back to the anguished words of Michele Wallace: "A lot of students are confused. They don't understand the difference between Edmund Gordon and Leonard Jeffries. And I think a number of us need to take on this task if black studies is ever going to be a serious area." Well, Ms. Wallace, I have news for you: the marginalization of Leonard Jeffries is not the only task you need to take on if black studies is ever going to be a serious area. There is something else you and your colleagues need to be saying, loudly and clearly: *What we do is not what Houston Baker and his ilk do. If we are scholars, they are something else.* The day I see those words published in *The New York Times Book Review* under the byline of a tenured professor of black studies is the day I read another book by a tenured professor of black studies. Until then, I'll take my Richard Wright, Louis Armstrong, Romare Bearden, E. Franklin Frazier, and B. B. King neat, thank you very much.

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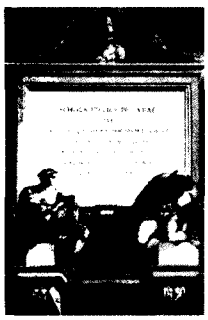

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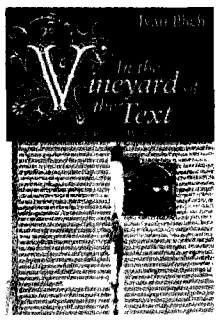

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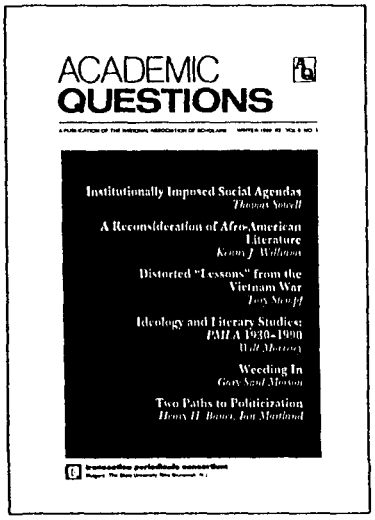

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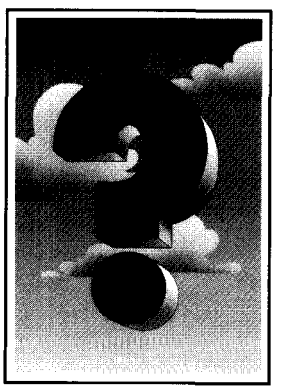

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